

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman is on the left, looking towards the man on the right. They are both smiling slightly. The lighting is soft and warm, with a blue and purple tint. The man is shirtless, and the woman is wearing a light-colored top. The background is dark and out of focus.

UNDERCOVER

LOVE

A BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

— LUCY SCORE —

Undercover Love: A Billionaire Romance

Lucy Score

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UNDERCOVER LOVE: A BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

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For my bearded man.

CHAPTER ONE

Yoga pants and a pizza.

That's really all Ashley wanted, but it wasn't in the cards for her tonight. She glanced at her watch as she hustled down the sidewalk in the breezy North Carolina spring air. By the time she got home, she was only going to have an hour to undo the damage of inventory day and get presentable.

She wasn't exactly fond of the idea of giving up a much-needed relaxing Friday night to attend some cocktail-attire, back-patting celebration. She sighed and slid her sunglasses on against the glare of the late afternoon sun.

It was even worse knowing that the dreaded Ice Queen was hosting. She imagined that in high school Victoria was the manicured, perfectly coiffed Homecoming Queen. Meanwhile, Ashley had spent high school trying to make her bangs not wing out on the sides.

Ashley scrubbed a hand through her coffee colored — now bang-free — hair. She was no all-American beauty like Victoria. Her dark eyes were a little too big, her mouth a little too full, especially when her lips were pursed in thought.

She had more confidence now than in her high school days but she often felt that familiar twinge of adolescent insecurity whenever golden girl Victoria was around.

It could be because the woman hated her.

Granted, she had never come out and said, "I hate you," but the subtext was clear.

Ashley slid behind the wheel of her hatchback and eased into downtown Wilmington traffic.

She knew better than to voice her concerns to Steven. Her fiancé was a devoted fan of all things Victoria. They were brokers at an investment firm owned by Victoria's grandfather ... or step-grandfather. In the beginning, Steven insisted that his friendly relationship with his co-worker was nothing more than his ticket to a corner office. But Ashley sensed that at some point

during the ass-kissing he really started to admire Victoria. Now Ashley was forced into uncomfortable social situations on a regular basis.

The metal bangles on her wrist jangled violently as she gripped the wheel.

Tonight, however, was no mere celebratory opening of the custom in-ground pool, Jacuzzi, and outdoor kitchen/wet bar — courtesy of Victoria's divorce settlement from Husband No. 2. Tonight was a fancy dinner party celebrating some accomplishment of the grandfather.

Cocktails at 7:00, the invitation read.

The only potentially interesting part of the evening was the location. It was being held at Victoria's stepbrother's home on the Cape Fear River. The most exclusive neighborhood in the area.

Jason was, according to office wife gossip, famously good-looking and equally scary. Ashley was curious to see him and his home. Maybe the evening would give her some good design ideas for the store. Or maybe it was one of those chrome and white post-modern monstrosities that bachelors who hire interior decorators end up living in.

Ashley doubted that even scary hot Jason and his sprawling estate would save the evening. If he was in any way related to Victoria, he was most likely a sociopath in Armani.

But tonight was for Steven's *career*. She sighed as she pulled into the parking garage. It was a phrase that was becoming more and more common in their conversations.

She thumped her head against the headrest. Things had changed so fast in the two years since her graduation. An engagement, a move to the loft, and a promotion to manager at work. Meanwhile, Steven was steadily climbing the corporate ladder.

A year ago, Ashley would have said they were on the same page, a team ready to take on the world. And now ...

Well, no one said life was going to be easy. Sitting in her car feeling sorry for herself wasn't going to fix anything. But maybe putting on a happy face and a nice dress might help a little.

She hopped out of the sedan and headed for the elevator. Spotting her neighbor, Ashley raised a hand to wave and then realized what the woman was doing.

"Mrs. Menifield!" Ashley rushed toward the elderly woman in the hot pink sweat suit who was attempting to maneuver a small-wheeled shopping cart up the concrete stairs, one step at a time.

“Oh, hello, Ashley! How was your Easter?” she puffed, yanking the cart up another step.

“Mrs. Menifield! What are you doing? Why aren’t you taking the elevator?” Ashley made a grab for the cart handle.

“I was watching that Dr. Oz yesterday and he said a good way to stay healthy is to take the stairs instead of the elevator.”

“But you live on the fourth floor!” Ashley tugged the handle out of Mrs. Menifield’s grasp.

“That’s how I’m going to get in good shape,” she chirped. “And then Mr. Morton will ask me to be his bridge partner.”

“Well at least let me take the cart for you. I could use some exercise, too.”

Eighteen minutes and four flights of stairs later, Ashley deposited Mrs. Menifield and her groceries in the kitchen. “Mrs. Menifield, please promise me you won’t take the stairs again when you have so much stuff to carry.”

“But how will I get my stair workout in?” Her brow was crinkled with worry.

Ashley pulled the last items — a giant can of Ensure and a bottle of cheap rum — out of the depths of the cart and set them on the counter. “How about you take the elevator up with your things, bring them inside, take the elevator down, and then walk back upstairs?”

Mrs. Menifield clapped her hands. “That is a wonderful idea!” She picked up the bottle of rum and wiggled it at Ashley. “Stop by sometime for a cocktail and you can help me measure my thighs to see how thin I get!”

###

Ashley hustled up two more flights of stairs and dove straight into a hot shower. She was toweling off when she heard the front door. A minute later, Steven breezed into the bathroom, ice cubes clinking in a glass.

He was a good-looking man in a country club kind of way. Tan and blond, his compact build that made people think he was a professional golfer or a swimmer.

“Hey, babe.” Steven grazed a peck on her cheek. She could smell the scotch and tried to remember exactly when it was that he had started ending his day with a glass.

Lots of changes.

“How was your day?” Ashley watched him in the mirror as he shucked off his button-down and pants. He tossed them on the floor next to the hamper and headed, naked, to the shower.

“Great!” his voice echoed off the tile.

“You’re home late today. Did you have a meeting?”

“I went for drinks with a couple guys after work. Pre-party party. How was your day?”

She told him about her Mrs. Menifield experience while winding sections of her hair around the barrel of the curling iron.

“Why the hell do you bother with that old bat?” He twisted the water off and grabbed a towel. “When we put this place on the market I hope none of the buyers run into her in the elevator. She’ll drag down the property value.”

Steven’s latest idea in his ever-expanding life plan involved putting the loft on the market and buying a roomy place in the suburbs. Ashley had a feeling that Victoria had planted that particular idea. It seemed like Victoria had made Steven her little pet project at the office, always offering up advice for ways to “get ahead” or make the partners “take notice.”

The first time Steven brought up the idea of selling the loft, the argument had lasted nearly three days before Ashley had agreed to consider it. She “considered” it to be an asinine idea, but also valued peace and quiet at home.

She ignored his comment and set her hair with spray. A little wild, a little tousled. Perfect.

He padded past her to the closet. “Hurry up. We’re going to be late.”

Gee, darn. Ashley stifled a sigh and shimmied into the black sheath dress, her latest bargain find. It was a bit more low cut than was probably appropriate for a buttoned-up kind of function like this, but it sure made her feel good. “How do I look?”

Steven hustled out of the closet tying his tie and paused to look at her. “You probably should have put your hair up. You know like ...” he gestured around his head. “Well, there isn’t really any time to fix it now.”

He hurried out of the bathroom and Ashley wondered how often other women had the irrepressible urge to flip off the men in their lives.

CHAPTER TWO

Where Victoria's suburban house could be labeled a McMansion, it was nothing compared to her stepbrother's home. There was no "Mc" in this mansion. Wood and stone melded with complex rooflines and acres of glass to create an impressive, if intimidating estate.

The circular drive was relatively empty except for a few catering vans and Victoria's white Mercedes. Steven parked his BMW and glanced over at Ashley. "Okay, remember what we talked about?"

She cleared her throat. "Compliment Victoria on the caterer's display and then act surprised when she says it was her plan."

Steven nodded. "And?"

"If any board members talk to me, I should work the conversation around to you and the volunteering you did in school."

"Good girl."

"I don't know if fraternity car washes count ..."

But he was already getting out of the car.

They were let in by a uniformed member of the catering staff. Only Victoria would hire a door-opener.

"There you are, Steven!" The door-opener-hirer clicked impressively down the hallway in towering Louboutins. Ashley didn't have to like the woman to covet her footwear. Her honey blonde hair was artfully styled in a French twist and she was poured into a striking red cocktail dress several degrees fancier than Ashley's.

"Oh, hello." Victoria's voice cooled considerably as she paused long enough to run her gaze over Ashley. "That's an ... *interesting* dress."

Bitch. "Thanks."

Victoria turned her attention back to Steven. Ashley tuned them out as they chattered, studying the interior instead. It was the opposite of Victoria's polar icehouse of glossy white tiles and ecru walls. Here, dark woods and deep colors reigned and, according to Google Maps, the entire back of the house had pretty spectacular river views.

She trailed her fingers over the stately entryway table. It was a fantastic piece, slightly distressed and undeniably masculine in its bulk and lines. Something that would sell in a day at Dwell. Victoria's stepbrother either had excellent taste or a really good decorator.

A door down the hallway opened and Ashley froze in place.

The man who stepped out was easily the most beautiful person she had ever seen. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had thick, dark hair and a stride that ate up the distance between them.

Power, confidence, perfection.

Ashley shut her mouth, which had unfortunately fallen open. He entered the foyer and she was treated to a closer look. Sculpted bones and a strong jaw under a ruthlessly trimmed beard. Sharp angles and smooth plains. It all blended into a face fit for an angel. A fallen one.

No wonder the office wives fanned themselves when they talked about him.

He wore the tailored charcoal suit with a careless comfort. His silk tie had thin stripes of forest green that matched his piercing eyes. Piercing eyes that she could see clearly because the man had stopped less than a foot away from her. Crap.

She tried to rearrange her features into a serene expression, or at least one that looked less pained. He watched her intently, not speaking.

"There you are, Jason." Victoria's cultured tone from the opposite side of the foyer cut through Ashley's haze. "Steven, this is our host, Jason."

The Adonis extended his hand to Ashley and — with only a second's hesitation — she mechanically placed hers in his warm, strong grip. It wasn't a handshake, she thought as he tugged her a half step closer. It was a suggestion.

"Hello." His voice was like whiskey. Smooth with a slow burn that lit her up from the inside.

She felt a jolt travel up her arm. She was holding a live current.

"Hi." It came out as part squeak and part whisper.

"Jason!" Victoria barked.

Ashley watched a cloud, shades darker than irritation, pass through those emerald eyes.

He shifted his gaze from her flushed face to his stepsister, still holding Ashley's hand firmly in his. "Yes, *Vicky*?" His eyebrow raised mockingly.

If killer bees could shoot out of eyes, Ashley was pretty sure Jason would have been anaphylactic on the word “Vicky.”

“This is, Steven,” Victoria repeated.

“Hello, Steven.” He managed to sound both disinterested and dangerous. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Steven must have sensed the same in his tone because he laughed nervously. “Don’t believe everything your sister tells you,” he joked.

“Stepsister.” Jason corrected crisply. He immediately turned his attention back to Ashley. She felt her cheeks flush. “And you are?” His tone was lower, warmer now.

She cleared her throat. “I’m Ashley.”

“Steven’s *fiancée*,” Victoria said pointedly.

Jason ignored her. He brought his other hand to cover their joined ones. “A pleasure.”

Why did that sound like a threat? And why was she suddenly picturing sheet-shredding sex?

Then, just as suddenly, he released her and turned on heel. Ashley sagged against the table and blew out her breath.

“Friendly guy,” Steven joked and Ashley could tell he wasn’t happy with the dismissive treatment.

Blatantly rude. Blazingly sexy. He obviously didn’t think highly of Victoria either. Who was he? Enemy or ally?

###

Guests began to arrive and Ashley busied herself making small talk. She was used to being on her own at these events. Steven found it easier to work a room without her tagging along, which was fine with her. There were only so many times she could listen to the “deal that came down to the bet on the ninth hole” story.

“Ashley! You look great!” A lovely woman with a short, dark pixie haircut approached and gave Ashley a quick hug.

“Cara! I’m so glad to see you.” Ashley returned the hug. “I wasn’t sure if you and Kevin were coming tonight.”

Cara’s husband, Kevin, worked with Steven at the firm. Cara was an attorney with a hefty caseload of pro bono work who also ran marathons and volunteered at her daughter’s school once a week. At five feet nine with

enviable fashion sense she could have easily been a willowy runway model. Tonight's ensemble was a sexy eggplant wrap dress that complimented her flawless bronze skin and a chunky, mixed metal necklace with matching chandelier earrings. Cara was never short on wow factor.

"We can't stay long. The sitter has to leave early. She's got SATs in the morning. Are you here for the duration?"

"It looks that way. We even came early so Steven could give Victoria a hand with the party prep. So I imagine I'm here forever."

"Watch out for that one," Cara said, pointing a manicured finger toward Victoria who was chatting with a small knot of people near the doorway. "She's a monster."

"I feel my fight or flight instincts kick in every time she talks to me," Ashley joked.

"I'm serious, Ashley. Victoria Van Camp is a sociopath. There is nothing human about that woman."

"Steven keeps assuring me that she's a wonderful person who doesn't hate my guts. I'm kind of glad to know that someone else gets the same vibe from her."

"It's no vibe. You listen to those instincts," warned Cara. "Victoria has a history of setting her sights on a man, seducing him, and then discarding him. Three years ago, she started on Kevin."

"Kevin? *Your* Kevin?" Kevin fit the tall, dark, and handsome bill perfectly and from all appearances was head over heels in love with Cara and their daughter.

"She underestimated him, and she certainly underestimated me. I wasn't about to let some bored socialite turn my husband into a play toy. She didn't take it well. She went to HR and complained that Kevin was sexually harassing her. The complaint was unfounded, obviously, but he still was suspended for a week while they investigated and the investigation stays on his record."

Ashley's jaw dropped and she couldn't help but stare at Victoria.

"You look shocked."

"I just thought she was a bitch."

"Well, she's definitely that, too."

"How can you be in the same room with her? I wouldn't be able to stop myself from smacking the martini out of her hand and punching her in the face."

“I fantasize about that. But I comfort myself with knowing that someone that batshit crazy will end up taking herself out eventually,” Cara sighed.

“You’re a better woman than I am.” Ashley plucked two glasses of champagne off of a passing waiter’s tray. “To not being batshit crazy.”

Cara clinked her glass to Ashley’s. “Amen. So did you meet Jason?”

“You mean the sexiest man in the universe? He shook my hand and I’m pretty sure my fingerprints melted off from the heat.”

Cara laughed. “Told you!”

###

Eye-gougingly bored. That was how Ashley would describe her state as the woman next to her droned on about how she and her husband Herbert Something-or-Other bred wire fox terriers for ten years. Ashley assumed those were dogs. Cara and Kevin had made their exit earlier to relieve the babysitter, leaving Ashley to fend for herself.

The only hot spot of the evening — besides Cara’s bombshell — had been Jason’s introduction, and she hadn’t seen him since he disappeared back down the hallway, leaving her smoldering in his wake.

“And of course, you know, just because Horatio Brandenchild III was no longer a viable stud, we simply couldn’t just get *rid* of him.” The woman pressed a heavily jeweled hand to her heart.

“Of course not,” Ashley agreed, half-listening. She scanned the room that Victoria had called the grand salon and spotted Steven near the massive fireplace with a scotch in hand, laughing at something an older gentleman was saying.

She bit back a sigh. It wasn’t so long ago that Steven would have preferred a nice, cold beer to a glass of scotch. But beer and Friday night pizza didn’t fit in as nicely as scotch and golf. He had taken lessons all summer long and was proud of his progress. Ashley had gone with him once or twice, but her swearing and club tossing made them both decide that golf was not her game.

She was starting to think that if she didn’t decide to change her course to match Steven’s, they would completely diverge. Were his choices so much better than hers? Sure, he brought them more financial security than she had ever expected. But did it have to come at the cost of who they were? Or at least who she was?

Ashley straightened her shoulders. The mental pity party wasn't helping anything.

Mrs. Herbert Whoever was just wrapping up her description of how they sent Horatio III to live with a cousin on a farm in Iowa where he could wile away his days under the shade of leafy maple trees and chase livestock.

Ashley smiled and made an appropriate-sounding comment, picturing a pancaked champion terrier tiptoeing out from under a very large cow. She shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Her champagne glass was empty, her bladder was full, and her feet hurt already. It was time to sneak off. She excused herself and headed out of the room.

One small but exquisitely decorated powder room and waiter with a tray of champagne later, Ashley was in better spirits. She peeked into the salon and spotted Steven still at the fireplace with a fresh scotch and a cluster of people.

He wouldn't notice if she just ducked out for a few minutes. Maybe find a couch on which to face-plant. There had to be less formal rooms somewhere off the stately, arched hallway.

The second door on the left yielded carpeted stairs leading down. She darted a quick look over her shoulder before shutting the door quietly behind her. She flicked on the light switch and descended.

The stairs opened into a spacious room with a pool table, Jumbotron-sized TV, and a bar. She pried off her shoes and squished her grateful toes into the plush, cream-colored carpet.

There were doors and windows that led outside to a covered patio, and, if it wasn't so dark outside, Ashley knew she would be staring at a yet another beautiful river view.

There was a hallway past the bar with yet another powder room, a fully equipped home gym, and a large glass window. The room beyond was dark, but when Ashley peered against the glass she could just make out painted lines on a court.

This guy had a freaking racquetball court in his house.

This was too good of a find to ignore. Ashley hurried to the next door and found the entrance to the court. Outside was a rack with racquets, balls, even gym towels.

Maybe it was the champagne, but when faced with a perfectly good unused racquetball court, Ashley couldn't think of a reason not to hit a few

balls. Just for a minute, of course.

She dropped her shoes and grabbed a lightweight racquet.

Ashley had met Steven her sophomore year of college in gym class playing racquetball. She had pegged him in the kidney returning his “unreturnable serve.”

Still holding her glass of champagne, Ashley balanced the ball on the racquet, bounced it once, and then fired it at the front wall. The satisfying *sproing* noise made her laugh. She hiked up the skirt of her dress and skipped to catch the ball on the bounce. Volleying with herself, she moved leisurely across the court.

“I thought all the entertainment was upstairs.” The deep voice echoed around the court catching Ashley completely by surprise.

CHAPTER THREE

Whirling around, she managed to spill the entire glass of champagne into her cleavage.

Her pulse thundered in her ears. Caught! And not by just anyone. Mr. Hot Cold himself was leaning casually against the open doorway holding a towel.

No graceful way out of this one. Ashley cleared her throat. “Well, you caught me. I am a racquetball-playing cat burglar.”

She couldn’t tell if that was a smirk or a smile playing on his lips.

He studied her in silence for another beat.

“Lucky for me my security system has a program specifically for protection against racquetball-playing cat burglars.”

Relief flooded her. She had been half-afraid he was going to scream at her for trespassing. After all, he was sort of related to Victoria.

Ashley was starting to feel very exposed standing at the center of a floodlit room with him blocking her only escape. There was something more than a little dangerous in the way he was watching her.

“So what’s my punishment?” Her voice sounded forced to her own ears. Why the hell had she said that? It sounded so S&M-y.

Wordlessly, he held out the towel.

Ashley looked down at her champagne-soaked dress and took a tentative step forward.

His half smile made her think he was laughing at her. What champagne-soaked person wouldn’t want a towel?

Probably one who felt like she was being lured to her doom. Her hot, sexy doom.

He was just a host dealing with a wayward guest, she told herself. There was nothing to be nervous about. Her pulse ignored her rationalization and continued to thrum a frantic beat.

Chicken.

Ashley forced her feet into motion and closed the distance between them. She reached for the towel and inhaled sharply when his fingers brushed hers.

She expected the jolt this time, but just because she was expecting it didn't mean she was ready.

How much champagne had she had?

Self-consciously, Ashley pressed the towel to her breasts, blotting up the dampness.

"Thank you. I'd better check the floor to make sure I didn't leave a puddle ... of champagne."

He was still staring at her. It was unnerving. He obviously wasn't making an effort to be polite.

She hurried back to the center of the court. Her dress didn't allow for easy bending, so she knelt down to mop up the spill. She could feel the wet fabric digging into her breasts, making them spill over the top. What a picture this must make. With the floor clean, she grabbed the racquet.

"Are you ready for your punishment?" He moved soundlessly and was now standing over her. She looked up at him from her crouched position.

His voice literally gave her goose bumps. They sprang up on every inch of her flesh.

Ashley cleared her throat again and looked up. "Can I appeal?"

He shook his head and held out a hand to her. "No appeals. Just a one-on-one game."

"Game of what?" Ashley asked breathlessly as he tugged her to her feet.

He raised an eyebrow. "Racquetball." He closed a hand over the racquet in her grip. "This one is mine."

Jason agreed to even the playing field by taking off his shoes. He loosened his tie and ditched the jacket, too.

Ashley forgot the strangeness of the situation and gave herself up to the competition. They volleyed back and forth easily to warm up. Soon the serves became harder and the returns more spirited. He moved with a surprising grace, but there was power, too, as he prowled the court.

He wasn't holding back and he played a little dirty, Ashley noted as he purposely stepped in her way to block her swing. She tromped on his foot as she hustled past him.

Her dress didn't give her a lot of freedom, but she was able to move with the skirt hiked up. Between points she tugged her top up and cursed her strapless bra for not being more supportive.

"20 serving 19. Game point."

Ashley was sweating and trying to hide the fact that she was panting. Jason swiped at his brow. At least he must be half human.

“Are you ready to lose?” He smirked at her as he bounced the ball.

The cocky bastard.

Ashley’s eyes narrowed and she snorted her disdain.

She won the serve and the next two points.

“21 serving 20!” She tossed him a haughty look over her shoulder. “Game point!”

He gave her another smoldering look. She couldn’t decide if he looked as though he wanted to eat her or something even scarier.

The serve was a perfect shot. She angled it just right so when the ball bounced behind the line it took an awkward spin and Jason sprinted for the sidewall. His underpowered backhand sent the ball slowly arcing toward the front wall.

It began to dip and Ashley couldn’t tell if it was going to hit wall or floor first. She charged forward and made it just in time as the ball dinked against the very bottom of the front wall. Swooping as low as she could she tapped the ball lightly.

She could hear him coming up behind her and didn’t bother to get out of the way. Ashley watched in slow motion as the ball bounced off the front wall and hit the floor, and she was hit from behind by a very warm, very solid body.

He saved them both from plastering their faces against the wall. Pinned between him and the wall, Ashley became aware of the arm banded around her just under her breasts.

She could feel every inch of him against her. He was so tall, but with his head tilted down to her, his breath was hot against her ear. Both of them were struggling to catch their breath. Ashley wasn’t sure if it was because she was overexerted or overexcited.

“Game,” she huffed out, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“You got in my way,” he said, not moving a muscle.

“Prove it.”

“I’m a little distracted right now.” His voice was ragged and his hand tightened around her waist.

Ashley looked down.

The dress had given up its valiant fight. The precarious straps had slipped from her shoulders and now displayed her breasts. Her nipples weren’t quite

covered by the purple and black lace strapless bra. And with every breath she took, everything heaved up and down.

Oh my God.

Ashley felt the flush creeping over her face and down her neck. Her boobs were probably blushing, too. Her hands were pinned between her body and the wall and she couldn't move to pull the dress back in place.

"Well this is awkward," she muttered, shifting back against him to get some space from the wall. He resisted for a moment and then backed up a pace.

"I've never seen that happen on a racquetball court before. And I've never cared less about losing either."

Keeping her back to him, Ashley hiked up her bra and dress. "Really? It happens to me all the time." She hoped the sarcasm masked some of the humiliation.

"We should really spend more time together."

Ashley turned to face him. He was actually smiling. A real, full-on grin. Goose bumps rushed to mingle with the blush and she felt her own lips quirk.

"OK, so what do I have to pay you to make sure this story is never, ever repeated outside these walls?"

"Our secret is safe," he promised and led the way off the court. He handed her another towel and took one for himself before grabbing a water bottle from the mini fridge.

"This is quite the setup." Ashley glanced around at the small room. Shiny lockers adorned one wall and there was a bench under another window looking into the court.

He handed her the water bottle. "You're quite the competitor."

She took a swig and passed the bottle back to him. "College. Four years of intramurals. That's actually how I met Steven."

"He doesn't seem like a racquetball man." Jason opened the bottle and drained half of it before passing it back to her.

Ashley studied him. "You don't think much of him, do you?"

He shrugged, but kept his eyes on her.

A man of few words. Interesting. "So, what was it like growing up with Victoria?"

"Do you mean was she born this way or was she dropped on her head in childhood?"

Ashley laughed. "I'm going to apologize in advance for this. I don't know you very well, so maybe you've got some creepy ascot collection in a dresser drawer. But from what I've seen, you two seem like ..." Mortal enemies? "I just can't imagine the two of you playing hide and seek together."

He was quietly studying her again.

"How about I make you a deal? For the rest of the night, I'll answer your questions if you answer mine," he said finally.

Uh, what? "Um, what?"

Jason smiled.

"Hmmm." Oh she had questions for him, but she wasn't sure she really wanted answers. "Don't you have hosting duties to attend to?"

"You're stalling." He lifted an eyebrow. "Do you want access to my deepest, darkest secrets or not?"

It was another challenge. And she desperately did.

"Okay, but let's lay some ground rules first."

"Fair enough. What kind of ground rules?"

"Like the topless incident, and me sneaking away from the party to hide in your racquetball court, all answers will stay between the two of us."

He nodded.

"And we each get one free pass to not answer a question."

His eyes narrowed as he considered.

"Fine," he agreed, gracefully sinking down on the narrow bench. He patted the spot next to him. "Sit."

CHAPTER FOUR

She sat, careful to keep at least an inch or two between them.

“Okay, I want to ask you the first question,” Ashley said, loosening and tightening the lid to the bottle. “Why are you willing to answer my questions and why do you want to ask me questions?”

“Doubling up on the first question?” Jason watched her ministrations with the water bottle before taking it from her.

She crossed her arms to still her nervous hands.

“I mean, you seem like a very private person.” He seemed like a freaking fortress of solitude.

Jason smiled wryly as if he had heard her mental clarification. “A few reasons. As you so astutely guessed, I hate cocktail parties and have no interest in making small talk with a bunch of strangers. Two, you seem to share my aversion as evidenced by your decision to hide in the basement. And three. I find you interesting.”

“Interesting?” Ashley repeated. Interesting awesome? Interesting weird? Interesting smart? Interesting I-want-to-strip-your-clothes-off-and-have-my-way-with-you?

“Interesting,” he repeated. “My turn. What do you do for a living?”

Relieved — and maybe a little disappointed — at the not-too-personal question, Ashley told him about working at Dwell. He, as it turned out, wasn’t entirely kidding about his security system. Jason was the owner of a tech company that developed high-end, high-tech security systems for commercial and residential clients.

His favorite color was green, and when he was seven he wanted to be a cowboy or an architect.

She told him about getting detention for starting a food fight in the junior high cafeteria and about her neighbor’s cat, Fatty, that she used to dress up for Halloween. And about how she met Steven.

“How is it you light up when you talk about work and look so sad when you talk about your fiancé?”

Ashley balked. Should she pass? No, because then he would pass when she asked him about whether he had even been married or what his relationship with Victoria was like. She cleared her throat and stared at the lockers.

“Well, I love my job and find a lot of fulfillment there. And with Steven ...” she trailed off for a moment. “With Steven, things are different now compared to just a year or two ago. He’s different.”

“Different good or different bad?”

Ashley puffed out the breath she didn’t know she had been holding. “I don’t know. I guess just different different. And I feel like maybe I have to make a choice now to either be me, or be different, too.” It came out in a rush.

“Always be you,” Jason said flatly.

“Are you always you?” She glanced at his profile. It was his turn to stare at the lockers.

“Yes, but sometimes even then I end up doing things I don’t really want to.”

“Like hosting a cocktail party?”

He smiled grimly. “Like hosting a cocktail party.”

She nudged his shoulder. “I think we’re depressing each other. Let’s talk about something else.”

They both agreed that football was their favorite sport to watch. They were on opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to TV viewing habits and neither of them had ever had a dog.

He told her that he met Victoria, then fifteen, a week before his father married her mother. “She was a nightmare, even for a teenage girl,” he shook his head.

“How bad could she have been?” Ashley asked.

“Oh, no. You already asked your question. It’s my turn.” Jason leaned back against the wall and she felt heat as his knee brushed hers. She didn’t move away from the subtle pressure and wondered if he was as intensely aware of the physical contact as she was.

Probably not. Maybe he had a nerve problem and couldn’t feel things in his knees. Or maybe he thought her leg was just bench.

“Tell me something that you’ve never told anyone before.”

“Whoa. What kind of something?”

“Stalling.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Fine.” She blew out a breath and considered her options. “When I was in fifth grade, I was walking home from school and I saw a rabbit get hit by a car. She was still alive, but her back leg was hurt. So I picked her up and put her in my backpack.”

“Of course you did.”

“Anyway, I wasn’t allowed to have pets growing up, but I couldn’t just leave her there in the street. So I snuck her into my bedroom and put some Band-Aids on her leg and kept her in my closet.”

“How do you know it was a she?”

Ashley bit her lip.

“Oh no.”

“Yeah, about a week later, she had eight babies.”

He covered his mouth.

“And it wasn’t long after that that I came home and they weren’t in the closet anymore. My parents still talk about the Great Bunny Infestation. They never did find out how all those bunnies got in the house.”

He was laughing now. “You are a piece of work.”

“I like to consider myself piece of *art*,” Ashley sniffed. “Okay, my turn. I have this theory that beneath her makeup and nail polish and hairspray, Victoria is like an axe murderer or something. What’s the worst thing you’ve ever seen her do?”

He rubbed a hand over his chin, the stubble making a scratching sound. “Pass.”

Damn it. Maybe she had underestimated his loyalty to his stepsister. “You know that makes me wonder even more. But I will respect the pass. How about this? Why don’t you like Steven?” she asked.

His eyes narrowed. “You’re good.”

Ashley painted on an innocent look and steepled her fingers. “I believe you’ve already used your pass.”

“I never said I didn’t like him.”

“Stalling.”

“Fine. From what I’ve seen of him he seems like an ass-kissing weasel.”

“Well, don’t hold back or anything!”

Jason shrugged. “You asked.”

“What makes you think he’s an ass-kissing weasel?”

“I said ‘seems like.’ And I already answered your question. It’s my turn.”

Ashley scrunched up her nose. “Fine. What’s your question?”

Jason was taking his sweet time. He scratched the back of his head and leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees. She liked watching him squirm. Hell, she just liked watching him.

“Got one. What’s your biggest relationship fear?”

Ashley’s eyes narrowed. Where was he going with this? She couldn’t quite shake the feeling that she was playing a part in some weird game known only to him. But he was impossible to read.

She sighed. “I have this fear about not ever having that first kiss again. You know, the one that’s all hot and heavy and leaves you panting. The one where the whole world melts away and you know that the only thing he sees in that moment is you. I guess it’s just a fear of never been seen again.”

She spared a glance at him. He was nodding thoughtfully. “I get that.”

They sat in silence for a minute. “We should probably head back upstairs. They may send out a search party soon.”

Jason looked at her, eyebrow raised. God he was good-looking.

“I know,” she sighed. “They probably have no idea we’re missing.” She knew it was true. Steven was probably schmoozing the crap out of a senior partner somewhere while Victoria kicked puppies on the patio.

“One last question,” Jason suggested. His voice was low and he was watching her closely again.

“Go for it.”

“What would you say if I offered you something?”

“Depends on the something.” He made her pulse race every time he looked at her. This was not the right kind of reaction to have for someone who wasn’t her fiancé. This was the reaction she should be having to her fiancé.

“A first kiss.”

Ashley’s heart started to pound. She was sure Jason could hear it thudding away in her chest.

What if she never had another chance for a first kiss? What if she was destined for chaste pecks on the cheek for the rest of her life? What harm could one kiss do? How dangerous would it be to have his mouth on hers?

What if he was just teasing her?

CHAPTER FIVE

“Ashley, do you realize you haven’t said a word or taken a breath in over a minute?”

She laughed nervously. She couldn’t stop staring at him and knew her eyes were probably the size of golf balls. He was just inches away from her.

“What would you say?” he repeated.

Ashley recovered herself. “I’d say ...,” she was sensing danger. “Pass.” She jumped up from the bench and started for the door to the hallway.

“I’d better get back.”

She didn’t even make it to the door. He caught her from behind and gently, but firmly pressed her against the wall. He moved so fast she didn’t even know he had gotten up from the bench.

“Don’t walk away from me.” He said it quietly, lips moving against her ear. There was a steel-hard warning in his tone.

He turned her around slowly, deliberately.

She couldn’t look him in the eye. Her heart was pounding in her ears and all she could do was stare at his perfect mouth.

“Do you want me to explain why ‘Pass’ isn’t the right answer?” He dipped his forehead toward hers. Their mouths just a breath apart.

Ashley shook her head in a jerky side-to-side motion. “No, I’m good thanks,” she whispered. She tried to step to the side, but he merely tightened his grip on her arms.

The contact overwhelmed her senses.

“Let me tell you anyway. If you really didn’t want to kiss me, you would have said no, my ego would have deflated, and we would go back to the party as if nothing happened. But you didn’t say no. And given our honesty clause that leads me to believe ...” he slid his hands from her arms to her waist, “that your answer is yes, but you’re afraid of the consequences of saying it.”

“Consequences?” Ashley was breathless, struggling to focus, but it was hard with him taking up every one of her senses.

“There don’t have to be any consequences, Ashley.” The way he said her name made her shiver. “Aren’t you just a little curious what it would feel like?”

She brought her hands to his shoulders, but instead of pushing him back they betrayed her and just rested on his tailored button down. It was crisp to the touch, but she could feel his heat radiating from underneath it.

“I think I’m having a heart attack,” she whispered.

He smiled darkly and raised a hand to her throat, his fingers resting over the spot where her pulse thundered.

“Just one kiss.” He brushed his lips across her cheek and into her hair. “No one will ever know.”

It was a dark promise. A secret between strangers.

She almost gave in. Almost let herself sink into that mouth. But there was something hard in his eyes. Another secret.

She pressed more firmly against his chest until he backed off a step. “Someone always knows, Jason. And I’m not the kind of person who carelessly tosses aside a relationship whenever it’s ...” she looked him up and down. “Tempting.”

Jason put his hands on his hips and looked away. There was something in his expression, a mix of regret and relief. Ashley didn’t know what his game was, but she felt like she had won this round.

“I’m going back to the party. Let’s just forget any of this ever happened.” Without waiting for his response, Ashley spun around and hurried through the door, leaving him alone.

CHAPTER SIX

In the powder room, she was able to right some of the damage to her makeup and hair. But she couldn't do anything about the dazed look in her eyes or the fact that her pulse was still tachycardic. Her usually chatty brain was stunned into silence.

What was she doing? Almost making out with a stranger in a basement at a party while her fiancé innocently enjoyed cocktails upstairs. Obviously Steven wasn't the only one who had changed in the past year.

She sighed and stared at her reflection. "Just who the hell are you?" she whispered. What the hell had made her jeopardize everything?

The thrill.

Even as she thought it, Ashley's cheeks flushed. She had never felt like that before. For a few seconds, she was the center of someone else's world. It was a dangerous rush to play Jason's game, whatever it was.

Shaking it off, Ashley patted her hair back into place and squared her shoulders. Hoping that the guilt wasn't written all over her face, she went in search of Steven.

She was halfway down the hall when two older men deep in conversation stepped out of a room in front of her. They paused when they noticed her.

The taller gentleman on the right seemed vaguely familiar to Ashley. He was broad-shouldered with a full head of white hair.

"We'll talk later, Gil," he said to the man at his elbow, dismissing him. "Excuse me, my dear, have you seen my grandson?" His voice filled the hall with a hint of New England.

Ashley smiled. "It's possible. Who is your grandson?"

Then she noticed his eyes — the familiar shade of emerald — and Ashley felt her smile falter for a second.

"His name is Jason. And he's —"

"Usually frowning? Hates parties?"

He raised his eyebrows. "That's a very accurate description of my grandson."

Ashley smiled and hoped she didn't look like a party guest who almost let his grandson get to third base. "You must be Mr. Baine."

"Please, call me Eli." He extended his hand.

"Ashley Sapienza." He had to be in his mid-70s, but his grip was strong, vital.

"Italian?" he asked.

"On my father's side. My mother's family is Irish."

"You certainly got the Italian looks," he gestured toward her dark hair.

"And unfortunately the Irish temper."

Eli laughed. "My Sophia, may she rest in peace, was Irish. We went through all of our wedding dishes the first year we were married. And I won't even tell you what happened to the cutlery."

Ashley laughed.

"Now you were about to tell me if you knew where I could find Jason, weren't you?"

"There you are, Grandfather. I've been looking for you everywhere."

Ashley knew without turning that it was Victoria. And had she not been watching Eli's face she would have missed the very subtle tightening in his jaw. Victoria's tone was degrees warmer than usual, almost nearing human temperatures.

"I've been discussing dishes with Ms. Sapienza," Eli winked at Ashley.

Victoria tossed a fake smile in Ashley's direction. "How nice."

"Was there something that you wanted?" Eli asked.

All warmth and charm again, Victoria put her arm through his. "I just thought you would want to know that dinner will be served shortly. I put you at my table with a mix of partners and associates. I know how you like to know everyone who works for you."

"That I do, Victoria." His eyes held hers for what felt like an uncomfortable moment to Ashley.

Victoria smiled brightly and patted his arm. "Well you should probably get back to your party. I'd hate for you to miss any of it, Grandfather."

What the hell was going on? Ashley felt like she was watching a Spanish soap opera. Understanding just enough to know there was trouble, but not enough to figure out why everyone was yelling. All they needed was bigger hair and a fast-talking, shirtless Latin lover.

"I suppose so. Ms. Sapienza, it was very nice to meet you. And if either of you see Jason, please tell him I'd like to speak with him."

“He’s probably busy ‘entertaining’ one of the female guests, Grandfather. You know how he is.” Her silvery laugh stabbed through Ashley.

Eli frowned.

“I’m only kidding, Grandfather.” Victoria patted his arm again. “He’s probably closeted away working. He’ll turn up for dinner.”

Eli nodded. “All right then. Ms. Sapienza, would you care to accompany me back to the festivities?”

“Actually, Grandfather, I need a word with her if you don’t mind. You go on ahead,” Victoria said, ushering him in the direction of the party.

Uh-oh. Since when did Victoria ever want a word with her? Did she know about Jason?

Victoria was blatantly studying her, and from her expression, Ashley was pretty sure she didn’t like what she saw.

“I don’t know what he sees in you,” Victoria said finally, her words were short and clipped.

“Excuse me?” Ashley felt her eyebrows skyrocket off her brow.

“Your *fiancé*.” Victoria sneered at the word.

For all of .5 seconds Ashley was relieved. Her secret was safe. Then relief bloomed into bloody-murder pissed.

“You don’t know what Steven sees in me?” Ashley repeated carefully.

“Good lord, you can’t even follow a conversation.”

“Are you *kidding* me? What is *wrong* with you?” Incredulous, Ashley looked up and down the hallway to see if anyone else was within earshot.

Victoria stepped closer. “What’s wrong with me is you. You don’t belong here. You’re a sales clerk for God’s sake. You should be on the catering crew. The way you follow Steven around, begging for his attention, is pathetic. We laugh about it. About you and your Target dresses.” Victoria flicked her fingers over the strap of Ashley’s dress, knocking it off her shoulder.

Ashley shoved her hand away. “You are a freaking psycho.”

Victoria smiled a dangerous, feline smile. “Oh don’t mess with me sweetheart. I will take you apart.” She leaned in, mere inches from Ashley’s face. So close that Ashley could smell her cloying perfume.

“Stay away from me. Stay away from my grandfather. And stay away from Steven tonight. He has work to do. Not that you’d understand.” She spun on her towering heels and clacked her way down the hall.

Ashley sagged against the wall.

A million comebacks swam through her head. Confrontation had never been her strong suit. Fury clouded her verbal abilities.

At least she got the “freaking psycho” part out.

The woman actually ordered her to stay away from her own fiancé. The only consolation was that she finally had concrete evidence that Steven couldn't brush off. She would tell him, and he would finally see that she wasn't being some overly sensitive, self-conscious little girl.

She shook her head to clear it as she hurried toward the salon. In the space of an hour she had been completely overwhelmed by two very different members of the same family.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ashley spotted Steven across the room. He was with Victoria, who was leaning in close, whispering in his ear. Victoria pulled back and when Steven nodded, she squeezed his arm and left. But not before shooting a triumphant smile in Ashley's direction.

Steven returned his attention to the group clustered near the fireplace, and Ashley made a beeline for him.

When she eased into the circle at his side, he was in the midst of another one of his favorite closing-the-deal stories. She forced a wifely smile and waited.

She wondered briefly where Jason was. Would he make another appearance this evening? Would she be ignored?

Speak of the devil, just as Steven hit the punch line of his story, she saw Jason enter the room. How was it possible for her stomach to drop and her heart to soar at the exact same time?

His gaze instantly cut to hers and held. She could read the message loud and clear: This isn't over.

Steven's elbow hit her solidly in the chest. "Oh, sorry, babe! I didn't see you there." He glanced down at her and she could smell the booze. The small crowd around them was dissipating.

"Steven, I need to talk to you for a second."

He shook the ice cubes in his glass and cleared his throat. "Look, I already know what happened."

"You do?" Crap, which part?

"Yeah, Victoria told me."

"Told you what?"

"About your meltdown in the hallway. Look, I'm not mad. I know you don't like her, but I can't understand why you'd attack her like that. You know how important she is in the company."

"I attacked *her*?" Ashley's whisper carried a barely contained shriek.

“Babe,” he sighed heavily. “I know you don’t get all of this, but let’s just try to make the best of it since she got you calmed down, okay? Or do you want me to call you a cab?”

“Let me get this straight. Victoria told you I attacked her in the hallway, she got me calmed down, and now you’re offering to send me home in a cab?”

“Keep your voice down.” Steven glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention. “Look. You can stay or go. It doesn’t matter to me.”

He wasn’t even looking at her anymore. He was too busy scanning the room. “Think about it and let me know. I want to go talk to the Senator.” Without waiting for an answer he hurried off. Shell-shocked, Ashley watched him go.

Fairly certain she was nearing a complete breakdown, she moved to the bar and asked for whiskey. Downing the amber liquid, she closed her eyes as the delicious burn made its way down her throat.

Maybe she should leave. She could just call a cab, go home, and pack. This wasn’t the Steven she fell in love with and she doubted that she was the same girl he fell for, either.

Victoria may have been a bitch, but she was right about one thing. Ashley didn’t belong here.

She felt a tingle between her shoulder blades, reminding her that she was unprotected. Prey.

“Ready for a rematch?”

His voice sent a warm jolt down her spine. “That was a one-time ... occurrence,” she hissed, turning slowly. She hadn’t even heard Jason come up behind her. He moved like a freaking jungle cat.

“Are you part ninja or something? You have this habit of sneaking up and scaring the crap out of me.”

He smiled and lifted his glass to his lips. “Maybe your hearing just isn’t very good.” She narrowed her eyes. They stood shoulder to shoulder, surveying the room.

Lots of well-dressed people seemed to be enjoying themselves. Oblivious to the potential eruption in the corner.

“Don’t think that you can just run away and pretend this never happened, Ashley.”

“Nothing did happen, *Jason*.”

“Then why are you running away?” He was smirking again.

“Shut up.”

He flagged a server and handed Ashley a glass of champagne. “Here. You can drink this one instead of wearing it.”

She rolled her eyes, but accepted the glass, taking a deep swallow. She watched as across the room, Steven, now in the company of several younger execs, burst into raucous laughter.

Jason followed her gaze. “You are welcome to spend the night here. There’s room in my bed.”

Ashley crossed her arms. “I can’t figure out your game.”

“What makes you think this is a game?”

“Either you make a habit of seducing women at parties or ...”

“Or what?”

“Or you’re abnormally interested in me for reasons yet to be explained.”

“You can’t think of any reason I’d be interested in you?” He laughed, an unexpected booming sound.

Ashley shook her head. “You are nothing like I thought you would be.”

“How’s that?” Eyes forward, he ran a finger down the nape of her neck, following the exposed skin on her spine to the top of her dress.

A new crop of goose bumps erupted on her arms.

“You’re not some cold, obnoxious tycoon.”

“What am I?” He wasn’t even pretending to scan the room now. He was watching her face.

“Dangerous.”

She patted herself on the back for managing to keep the shiver out of her voice. “Now if you’ll excuse me I have to find my fiancé.” And possibly kick him in the balls.

She brought Steven a beer to tone down the scotch and took his arm automatically when dinner was announced. Now was not the time for a relationship showdown, so she kept a tight lid on her emotions.

Ashley purposely kept her eyes focused ahead, even though she could feel Jason watching her.

It was amazing how one evening could make someone so keenly aware of another human being.

Ashley surveyed the dining room with its clusters of round, numbered tables with elegant floral centerpieces. “Where do we sit?”

“Victoria said something about a seating chart.” Steven guided them to the closest table.

“Steven, you’re over here.” Victoria waved from a table along the wall and started toward them.

He pinched Ashley. “Behave,” he whispered under his breath and steered them over to the table.

Ashley felt her body tense, debating the merits of fight or flight, and kicked herself for not being braver.

“You don’t mind if I steal your fiancé do you?” Victoria asked with a sharp smile.

Ashley felt the bite in the words.

“I thought it would be more fun if I split up some of the couples at different tables. You understand, don’t you?”

Steven pinched Ashley again, hard. “Of course.” Ashley gritted her teeth in a fake smile.

“You’re at table eight.” Victoria waved dismissively at the far wall. “Steven, you’re with me.”

Steven tipped his beer bottle in Ashley’s direction as Victoria pulled him away. “Later, babe!”

Well, at least she didn’t have to worry about losing control and accidentally murdering the two of them, or having Steven somehow sense her guilty conscience over Jason during dinner. She only had to worry about making small talk with strangers and surviving until she could drive Steven home and kick his ass.

And then lock herself in the bathroom and try to trace her steps back to exactly where she lost her sanity. Ashley squared her shoulders and went looking for table eight.

She found it in a cozy corner on the exact opposite side of the room from Steven. She wondered if that was a coincidence, or if Victoria had relegated her to Dining Room Siberia for a reason. Dining Room Siberia with Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Something. Well, at least by now she and Mrs. Herbert were practically old friends.

“Hello, again,” she said, approaching the table.

“Oh hello, my dear!” Her tablemates waved cheerily.

“Allow me.” Ashley didn’t even have to look up to see who was pulling out her chair. Her biggest concern was no longer small talk with strangers.

Jason tilted his head, eyebrow raised. He was daring her to play.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Wallaces — Jason was acquainted with them — were thrilled to have the host at their table. The dinner chatter increased when they were joined by another rather important-looking couple. Apparently Ashley and Steven were the only couple Victoria had split up.

Jason took the seat to her right. His hand rested familiarly on the back of her chair where his fingers occasionally grazed the exposed skin of her neck while he discussed market swings with Mr. Webster in the crisp gray suit.

Ashley tried not to squirm in her seat. The whole evening was surreal. One minute she was playing racquetball in a cocktail dress, the next she was being accosted by a wicked stepsister.

Now she was sitting at a dinner table next to Mr. Hot Cold while following the small talk happening around her.

“Tell us about yourself, my dear,” Mrs. Wallace said suddenly, drawing her attention back. “We all seem to know each other already.”

“Yes, Ashley, please do,” Jason smiled, turning to give her his full attention.

She offered him a sweet smile and kicked him under the table as the focus of the entire table fell heavily on her.

She cleared her throat. “Well, I’m Ashley. I work in retail. I’m the manager of a small home furnishings boutique downtown. And, I think this soup is delicious.”

The table laughed.

The mustachioed Mr. Webster nodded approvingly. “Retail! That’s where I got my start.” He turned to his wife, a diminutive brunette dressed in scarlet. “I bet you didn’t know my first job was in my father’s grocery store, did you?”

She smiled prettily. “Darling, we’ve been married for forty-six years. I know everything there is to know about you.”

Ashley laughed with the rest of the table and watched as he cupped a hand over his wife’s. “Yes, I keep forgetting that. Forty-six years? It only

feels like five minutes ...”

“Underwater,” Mrs. Webster finished.

Another round of laughter erupted and Ashley relaxed considerably.

“A grocery store? Wait a minute. Are you the Mr. and Mrs. Webster of Webster Foods?” she asked.

“Guilty as charged, my dear. Third generation, family-owned. My grandfather opened the first store in 1918.”

“I love your new local produce section in the downtown store.” Ashley leaned in. “It’s such a fantastic idea.”

“I can’t take the credit for that idea.” Mr. Webster patted his wife’s hand again. “My Anna was the brains behind that.”

Anna waved the compliment away with a smile. “I grew up on a farm, so we’re always looking for ways to support local farmers. It’s worked well at this store so I think we’ll have to talk about expanding the idea.”

“I had been shopping all the way across town at one of the health food stores for all my organic produce until I stopped in your downtown store for a Sunday paper and doughnuts. You know, it would be great if customers could sign up for the farms’ CSAs through the grocery store. Then they could just pick up their produce when they do their weekly shopping.”

Interested, Anna nodded. “That is a wonderful idea, my dear!”

“And if they’re already in the door, what’s to stop them from picking up a few other things that they need? You could even include recipes in each share with suggestions on where to find the rest of the ingredients in the store!”

“So you’re a business-minded woman who enjoys a sugary treat on occasion. Your fiancé is a lucky man,” Mr. Webster announced, nodding at Jason.

“Oh, Jason’s not my fiancé. Steven is at another table.” Ashley hastily corrected.

Jason’s fingers applied a subtle pressure to her neck. “Yes, Ashley and I are just old friends.”

Ashley flushed.

“Well, then, Steven is a lucky young man,” Mr. Webster amended.

“He certainly is,” Jason agreed quietly enough into his glass that Ashley was the only one who caught the words.

“Oh now, you’re embarrassing the girl,” Anna tiskied. “Tell us about your store. What’s it called?”

Recovering, Ashley chatted about Dwell until the entrées were served. It turned out that both wives had heard good things about the store's inventory and service, which Ashley filed away to share with her team. Conversations shifted to the couples as everyone ate.

"Don't you like your fish?" Jason leaned in.

Having him mere inches from her made Ashley's pulse spike. She hadn't even realized she'd been playing with her food rather than eating it. He really was stunning to look at. The strong cheekbones, the neatly trimmed beard. And those green eyes that pinned her down and made her feel like the only person in the room.

"No, it's delicious," she whispered back. "I'm just not very hungry."

"Are you feeling alright?" Genuine concern was in his tone.

"It's nothing physical."

"Really? It seemed like it could have been very physical earlier," he teased.

She shot him a glare. And then smiled brilliantly. She turned. "Mrs. Wallace, Jason loves dogs. Have you told him about yours?"

Ashley helped herself to a bite of fish and smiled smugly while Mrs. Wallace began to sing the praises of her dear free-range Horatio.

Jason's hand snaked under the table and squeezed her knee in a bone-crushing grip. Ashley covered her gasp with a cough and slipped her fork under the table. She jabbed it against his thigh until he released her.

As the dinner plates were cleared, the guests began to disperse. The early birds were bidding everyone goodnight and heading home. Ashley had a feeling she and Steven wouldn't be in that crowd. He was still sitting at his table — next to Victoria, she noted — listening raptly to something one of their companions was saying.

She and Jason rose to say goodnight to the Websters and the Wallaces.

"It was lovely to meet you," Anna said as she gave Ashley a peck on the cheek. "I hope I'll see you next time I visit your store!"

"What a lovely couple," Ashley said, half to herself, as she watched them leave the dining room.

"They're the only ones I can stand."

He didn't look like he was joking.

"So it wasn't a coincidence that they were at our table?"

Jason gave a half smile. "That was to appease me. And the Wallaces were to annoy me."

“What was I for?”

He smiled, a warm, slow curve. She felt her heart flip-flop. “Let’s just say you were a very interesting surprise.”

There was that word again. Ashley shook her head and sighed.

“What?”

“I feel like part of me wants nothing more than to talk to you all night and figure out what game you’re playing. And the much larger part wants me to run screaming in the opposite direction.”

“I would find you if you ran.”

“You know, saying things like that earns some people restraining orders.”

“Jason!” Victoria’s voice sounded like the lash of a whip from two tables away. She was walking toward them, frowning. Ashley had to brace herself to not take a guilty step away from Jason.

“Excuse me,” Jason said quietly and stepped forward to meet her. Ashley wasn’t sure, but it looked like he was putting himself between her and Victoria. It was probably on purpose. He didn’t seem like he did anything unintentionally.

They kept their voices low Ashley couldn’t hear most of their conversation, but it looked like Victoria was angry. Jason crossed his arms and shook his head.

Victoria took a step closer to him. “I can make you, you know. Just one word here in front of all these people ...” Her eyes glittered with excitement.

Jason gripped her arm and led her a few steps away.

Ashley strained to overhear their conversation, but could only glean from Victoria’s triumphant expression that Jason agreed to do whatever it was she asked. Victoria patted Jason’s chest smugly and without sparing Ashley a glance, turned on heel and headed back to her table.

Jason returned, his face impassive.

“What was that about?” Ashley was almost afraid to ask. Her mind raced with the possibilities.

“She wants me to keep you out of their hair while they have a meeting in the library.”

The breath Ashley didn’t know she was holding left in a woosh. “Out of their *hair*? Seriously, what is her problem?”

“Trust me, you haven’t got the time. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

CHAPTER NINE

He guided her out of the dining room, careful not to touch her, she thought. Steven didn't look up as they passed his table.

"Your fiancé doesn't seem to be very attentive," Jason observed. He put his hand on the small of her back and led her down the hallway.

"He's very focused on his career." It came out mechanically. Ashley blamed it on the fact that all she could concentrate on was the feel of Jason's hand against her. "He's just got a lot going on right now."

"And you?" Jason paused in front of a set of doors.

"And I what?"

He smiled and pushed the doors open.

"Jason, I don't think this is a good idea —"

She took a tentative step inside and he closed the doors behind them.

The room was full of rich, dark woods, leather, and shelves of books that rose from floor to ceiling. The massive desk was angled to take advantage of both the river view through the wall of glass and a direct line of sight to the entry. She had a feeling Jason wasn't the type who would appreciate someone sneaking up on him.

French doors opened onto the terrace outside and a large flat-screen dominated the opposite wall with more bookshelves. The hardwood under her heels was a dark, hand-scraped teak.

"Wow."

There wasn't an Xbox or an old box of pizza anywhere to be seen. The room officially had nothing in common Steven's home office.

"Jason, this room is incredible." She wandered around pausing to look at a book title or trail her fingers over the head-height wainscoting.

She turned to study him in his habitat. Leaning against the desk he seemed more relaxed. However, more relaxed didn't necessarily mean less dangerous.

Jason gestured at one of the overstuffed club chairs in front of the stone fireplace. "Sit."

Ashley narrowed her eyes, weighing her options. She was certain that nothing “bad” would happen unless she let it. She just wasn’t so sure that she wouldn’t let it. Grudgingly, she sat. He took the chair next to her.

“Are you cold? Would you like me to light the fire?”

Ashley noted a neat stack of wood next to the hearth. “If you tell me that you go out into the woods wearing flannel and chop your own wood, I may need to borrow Victoria’s fainting couch.”

He leaned forward in his chair and took her hand. “I have been known, on occasion, to swing an axe. And wear flannel. But usually only at the cabin.”

Ashley shifted in her seat. “You have a cabin?”

He nodded. “It’s on a creek in the woods about an hour from here.”

“Do you go there often?”

He nodded again still studying her. He was toying with her fingers. He spun her engagement ring around and around. “This doesn’t look like you.”

It was true. The platinum three-stone ring was more modern than what Ashley would have chosen. But complaining about the engagement ring the man you were going to marry so generously chose was pretty bad form.

“Who does it look like?” Ashley teased.

“Not you.”

They were silent for a few minutes. Ashley couldn’t quite relax in his quiet company. Victoria’s words from earlier kept ringing in her head.

“Do you do this often?” she asked, finally.

“Do what?”

“Choose a woman at a dinner party and see what happens,” she said looking at their joined hands.

“Is that what you think I’m doing?” His voice was mild, but his eyes hardened marginally. “Do you think you’re tonight’s distraction?”

“I honestly don’t know what to think. But I do know I’m not interested in being anyone’s conquest for the evening.”

Jason released her hand and leaned back in his chair. A smile that didn’t reach his eyes played on his lips. “It sounds like you don’t think very highly of me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How do I know that this isn’t about you getting back at your fiancé for ignoring you?”

Her temper flared and she shoved out of the chair. “You think I’m the kind of person who would do that?”

He shrugged, and she wanted to kick him.

She turned away from him and paced across the room, arms folded across her chest.

The accusation stung, and just beneath the surface was the awareness that she had basically accused Jason of the same thing.

She paused in front of a work console with several monitors streaming footage from security cameras around the estate. She watched as party guests went silently about their business. The caterers were packing up in the kitchen. Jason's grandfather was saying good-bye to two couples in the foyer. She took a deep breath.

"Are you saying that just because I offended you?"

"Yes."

"Do you actually believe it?"

"No."

She felt a smile play on her lips and was glad she had her back to him. He was nothing if not honest. "Then I'm sorry that I offended you. I was only asking a question," she said primly.

She heard him get out of the chair and willed herself to not turn around.

"I'm sorry I insulted you, and I was also only asking a question." He wasn't touching her, but she could sense him behind her.

"Fair enough. No, I'm not trying to get back at Steven for ignoring me."

Jason's hands came to her arms. "I don't ever do this with women at parties. Or anywhere else for that matter. And you should never settle for being someone's distraction or a conquest."

She felt his breath in her hair and shivered a little. If she leaned back just a fraction —

A movement on screen caught her eye. Two figures ducked out of a room and into a hallway. The woman leaned back against the wall and pulled the man to her in a hot embrace.

"What. The. Fuck."

It was Steven and Victoria.

CHAPTER TEN

Jason swore under his breath and reached around her for the keyboard. Ashley slapped his hands away. “Touch it and die.”

She could hear the blood pounding in her head. This time in rage. She watched her fiancé as he slid his hands down Victoria’s tight body while she cupped a hand to his crotch.

“Sound. Is there sound?” She whipped her head around toward Jason.

Wordlessly, he keyed in a command.

“I told you, babe. We’ll be together soon enough. At least we get to spend next weekend together.” Ashley heard the words crystal clear through the thudding in her head. Next weekend she was traveling home for her parents’ anniversary. Steven couldn’t go because of an important “deal” at work.

Victoria made a noise somewhere between a moan and purr. “I’ll give you until June, and then she’d better be gone.”

Steven pressed against her hand. “God you’re so hot.” He pulled back abruptly. “Where is Ash anyway?”

Victoria shoved him back further. “I told you I don’t like it when you say her name.”

“Babe! I’m sorry!”

Victoria crossed her arms. “Jason is keeping her out of our hair so we can have some time together. Do you want to waste it talking about her?”

Ashley felt tears prickle in her eyes, and her throat started to close. She pushed away from the desk, away from him.

She cleared her throat, refusing to look directly at him. “You knew.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

She stayed where she was for a moment. Absorbing. How was it that *that* hurt as much as Steven’s betrayal?

“So this was all a game. Just some entertainment for you and Victoria.” She said it flatly, keeping a tight rein on the emotions swirling. If she didn’t get out of this room, out of this house, she was going to explode.

“None of this is a game.” Jason stepped toward her.

Ashley threw her hands up. “Stay away from me.” Her voice shook, and she hated herself for it. She would not break in front of him, or any of them.

She wouldn’t give them the pleasure.

“Ashley —”

“I see you told her.”

Ashley whirled around. Eli was taking it all in from the doorway.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Grandfather, this isn’t the best time —”

“*He* knew, too? Does everyone know?” Ashley’s throat was closing on her.

Jason took another step toward her and she backed away.

He held up his hands as if approaching a skittish horse. “Ashley. This is not common knowledge. I found out yesterday.”

She raised her chin, prepared to not believe a word that came out of his mouth. “Go on.”

Jason walked to his desk and retrieved some papers from the top of a pile. He handed them to her. She took them, careful not to touch him.

Ashley reluctantly took her eyes off of him long enough to scan the top paper.

To: vvancamp@baineinvestments.com

From: snoll@baineinvestments.com

Babe,

We have all night tomorrow. Ashley is staying over at her friend’s. Can’t wait to see you ... naked.

To: snoll@baineinvestments.com

From: vvancamp@baineinvestments.com

I’ll have to get something special to wear so you can take it off of me!

Ashley’s stomach rolled. Humiliation was hot on her cheeks.

“These are emails between Veronica and Steven on their work accounts. A scan of the email server caught them, and the emails were brought to my attention yesterday afternoon. I shared the information with my grandfather.”

“My dear,” Eli stepped forward. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way, but we need your help.”

Ignoring them both, Ashley crossed the room and sank into a chair still clutching the emails. Shock and rage warred in her core.

To: vvancamp@baineinvestments.com

From: snoll@baineinvestments.com

Babe,

You look so hot in that skirt. I know you wore it to torture me. I spent all of the morning meeting thinking about bending you over my desk again.

Ashley crushed the papers in her lap and set her jaw. She was going to murder them both.

Jason was leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets. A deceptively relaxed stance.

“Why does any of this matter to you?”

“That’s a good question,” Eli said. He helped himself to a glass of Jason’s whiskey. “Would you like one?”

Ashley hesitated and then nodded.

He poured three fingers and handed her the heavy crystal glass.

“We have reason to believe that my step-granddaughter and your fiancé are, shall we say, ‘collaborating’ on some sort of outside business deal.” Eli paced while he talked. “From what we can gather it is at the very least against company policy and grounds for termination and at the worst, highly illegal.”

He paused in his pacing to look at Ashley. “Ms. Sapienza, I have spent my life building this company. I will not allow anyone, including a pseudo family member to tarnish it.”

“You said you needed my help. What could I have to do with this?”

Jason brought his hands to his hips. “There are emails in there that talk about some kind of deal they were working on. Their communications stopped suddenly in March when we think they moved to personal accounts.”

“We hope you’ll be willing to look closely at your fiancé’s accounts and records. Things that we wouldn’t have access to,” Eli continued.

Ashley studied her glass.

Jason pushed away from the wall. “Grandfather, would you mind giving us a few minutes?”

“Of course. Ms. Sapienza, you’ll have my gratitude if you are willing to help us. I hope you’ll consider it. Now if you’ll both excuse me, the excitement from tonight has made me tired. I think I’ll call it an evening.” He left the room quietly.

Ashley looked up when the door clicked closed behind him.

Jason was staring at her intently.

“What?” Her voice was clipped.

“Are you alright?”

“Does it matter?”

He crossed the room and sank into a crouch in front of her. “It matters very much.” Jason leaned in until she raised her gaze to his. “Are you alright?” he repeated.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, flatly.

“I didn’t want you to find out this way, Ashley.”

“How did you want me to find out? Maybe you planned to tell me after you seduced me on the racquetball court. That way you could blackmail me if I wasn’t willing to help.”

He stayed silent, absorbing her words.

Ashley could see it. A ruthless plan by a ruthless man. “Go ahead. Deny it.”

Jason took her firmly by the arms. “What did or didn’t happen between us has nothing to do with Steven, Victoria, or my grandfather’s company. My attraction to you isn’t part of any plan.”

Ashley shoved his hands away. “Don’t.”

When he moved back, she stood up and walked a slow path around the room. This is how it felt to have your world rocked, she thought. Like the bottom had dropped out and everything you thought you knew wasn’t true anymore.

She rifled absentmindedly through the copies of the emails. There were dozens of them. She could practically hear Victoria purring in them.

To: snoll@baineinvestments.com

From: vvancamp@baineinvestments.com

So that fiancée of yours didn’t notice that your “oil change” on her birthday took nearly three hours? I almost feel sorry for her. What a pathetic excuse for a woman. I hope you know you’ll never be able to disappear like that on me on my birthday. I’ll expect you to be at my beck and call. Naked. When are you getting rid of her??

To: vvancamp@baineinvestments.com

From: snoll@baineinvestments.com

As soon as you lock this deal down for us, she’s gone. And then I’m all yours.

Ashley abruptly dropped the stack of papers to her side. The numbness was giving way to a blind rage. There was only one thing that would make her feel better.

“It’s a lot to take in. Maybe you should sleep on it and —”

Ashley cut him off. “You were using me to get what you wanted.” She held up her hand when he started to speak. “I get that. You’re lucky that I want the same thing you do. I’m not going to trust you, but I will help you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ashley grimly gripped the handle of her coffee mug as she stared out at the gray scene beyond the loft window. Rain pattered on the glass and thunder rumbled in the distance.

The dreary sky matched her mood.

Mind spinning, she had driven herself home and tossed and turned for the better part of the night. Someone — mostly likely Jason — had poured Steven into a cab that brought him home. She was thankful that he had made it only as far as the couch before passing out cold.

When she stood over him early that morning, she had to restrain herself from choking him awake. She settled for shoving him onto the floor.

And when he mumbled “Toria” in his sleep, Ashley stormed back into their bedroom and took a seam ripper to the pockets of every pair of pants Steven owned.

The meticulous task helped temper her furious desire for blood down to a strong craving for revenge. He was in the shower now, blissfully unaware of the internal battle Ashley was fighting.

Spy or kill?

“Morning, babe.”

She tensed as Steven came up behind her and brushed a kiss across her cheek. “Oh my God, that coffee smells amazing.” He made his way into the kitchen, and Ashley turned to watch him pour himself a mug. “So last night was pretty crazy, right?”

Ashley’s glare bored holes in him, but Steven was oblivious. “Pretty crazy,” she agreed mildly.

“Sorry you had to drive yourself home.”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” she said, sipping her coffee. Ashley watched Steven grab the sugar bowl and heap several spoonfuls into the travel mug. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a work thing for lunch.”

Get him to talk about work. Jason's words echoed in her head. "Wow. On a Saturday? You've been really busy at work lately. Is it paying off?" The words stuck in her throat, but she forced them out.

Steven paused briefly without making eye contact. "I'm actually thinking about looking at other opportunities," he said, screwing the lid onto the mug.

"Any opportunity in particular?" She tried to keep her tone light.

"You're not pissed?" He looked suspicious.

"You've invested a lot of time at work and aren't getting ahead fast enough." It was as fake nice as she could get, given the circumstances, but he bought it.

"That's exactly it! I've been there four years, and they just keep telling me to 'be patient' and 'work hard.'" Steven waved dismissively. "If they don't think I'm partner material, there are plenty of other places that will."

Ashley bit her tongue and nodded. She was pretty certain he was parroting Victoria.

"Anyway, I've gotta get going. You working today?"

"Yeah."

"I'll see you later then. Text me and let me know what the plan is for dinner."

He grabbed his keys and wallet and waved over his shoulder on his way out the door.

Ashley went back to pensively drinking her coffee. Her phone signaled from the kitchen island.

Do you need me to come over with a shovel and a body-sized rug?

Jason's text almost made her crack a smile.

Not yet. He's still alive. Barely. Says he's looking at other employment opportunities."

Interesting. And then a few seconds later, How are you?

She ignored the text. She already knew she couldn't trust Jason. But they both wanted the same thing. It was a business relationship. There was no point in letting anything personal develop.

###

Two hours later, Ashley pushed open the shop door and paused to let the familiar scents, the charming order envelope her. It was a bright and airy space with light hardwood floors and whites, linens, and ecrus acting as a

crisp backdrop to the treasures and pieces Barbara Estep found in her travels. A corner unit, the store had windows on two sides and complimented the flood of natural light with chic industrial ceiling lights.

Ashley always found it to be a soothing atmosphere, even with the constant bustle of customers. This was home. And she was determined not to let anything else in her life ruin this place for her.

“Hey, boss lady!” The cheerful greeting came from the willowy redhead behind the register. At 52, Janice didn’t look a day over 35. She dressed like an artist and moved like a dancer. Her wardrobe flowed, and her accessories made their own kind of music.

Today, Janice was dressed in cropped pants with a gauzy tunic the color of limes. Her fire-engine curls were pulled back with a jade green scarf.

“Hi, minion. How’s it going so far today?”

“A little slow customer-wise. But we had two ladies come in and drop a pretty penny on the hand-carved armoire and two sets of the organic cotton bath linens. One of them definitely had her eye on the vase in the front window. She’ll be back for it,” she predicted.

Ashley smiled. She came to Dwell two years ago, fresh out of school and ready to tackle the retail world. Barbara, the store’s owner, hired her as assistant manager and immediately began grooming Ashley to take over one day. Six months ago, Barbara had named Ashley manager and increased her own traveling time.

This month, Barbara was in Morocco and her last email included a few pictures of pieces Ashley couldn’t wait to put out on the floor.

“Do you need anything before I head back?” Ashley asked, gathering up a few files from behind the register.

“Nope, I’m good. I’ll call you if anything interesting happens. Have fun in the cell!”

The cell was the staff’s affectionate name for the tiny, but obsessively organized back office. It was a windowless room barely bigger than a walk-in closet. Two sets of industrial shelving with office supplies and equipment occupied one wall. The desk, feminine in its subtle curves, stood in the center of the room.

Two Saturdays a month, Ashley closeted herself away in the cell to focus on paperwork and planning. She sank into the cool leather of the desk chair and paused for a moment to rest her head and close her eyes.

“My personal life will not affect my professional life,” she repeated quietly. A few deep breaths later, and she almost believed the mantra.

She took half an hour to schedule out a week’s worth of Facebook and Twitter posts for the store, announcing Tuesday’s sale on glassware and posting a few of the pictures from Barbara’s trip. Ashley reviewed and submitted the payroll online and then moved on to email the inventory report to the accountant.

Making her way down the list, she approved a magazine ad, responded to several customer questions, and was working her way through the special requests and orders when she paused to check her phone.

Two texts.

One from Steven.

Dinner with the guys at Woody’s tonight. Want to come?

And one from Jason.

You can’t avoid me forever.

Ashley rubbed her hands over her face and tried to ignore the dull throbbing behind her eyes.

She needed a night out. A few hours away from the disaster that had become her life. And she knew exactly who to call.

###

“Do my eyes deceive me or does your Facebook status say you’re home?”

“ASAP! Please tell me I can see you tonight!” The greeting exploded through the phone, making Ashley grin.

“I’m up for a night out if you are.”

Georgie’s laugh eased some of the tension around Ashley’s heart. Friends since high school, they had stayed in touch through college and ensuing careers and moves. Georgie was something of a club promoter who traveled constantly checking up on businesses owned by her company and scouting out other establishments for acquirement or competition assessment. As Georgie liked to say, she was paid to party four nights a week.

“Well it just so happens I have some research to do at Launch tonight. Are you in?”

“God, yes.”

“It sounds like we have a lot to catch up on. Is everything OK?” Georgie demanded.

Ashley sighed. “I’ll explain everything tonight over tequila. Lots and lots of tequila.”

“Then you’d better come to the hotel early and we’ll play dress up while you spill your guts.”

“I can’t wait to see you. I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Me too, Ash.”

When Ashley hung up, she realized Georgie hadn’t asked about Steven, which wasn’t really a surprise. She had never been much of a fan of him since he made a pass at her; it was during a weekend visit with Ashley when they were sophomores. He made a compelling “I was wasted” argument, apologized profusely, and Ashley had forgiven him.

But Georgie hadn’t forgiven or forgotten.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At 7 on the nose, Ashley eased into the marble-floored hotel lobby through the heavy revolving door. The two-story space was accented by huge potted plants surrounding a dramatic fountain.

“Ashley!”

She turned in the direction of her name and was nearly mowed over by a blur of honey blonde hair and long, tan limbs.

“Georgie! I am so glad to see you! You have no idea.”

Georgie threw her arms around Ashley and squeezed.

“I am so glad you called! I’m only in town for the weekend, and I wasn’t sure if we could get together!” She pulled back and squished Ashley’s face between her hands. “You look great!”

“I look great? You look amazing!”

Georgie shrugged off the compliment. “That’s what a week in Ibiza does for you. Now, come upstairs so we can catch up!” She half dragged Ashley to the bank of elevators, waving a friendly hello at the front desk staff.

“This place is beautiful,” Ashley said, leaning against the elevator’s railing. “I can’t believe you have a job that puts you up in places like this.”

Georgie flashed a brilliant grin. “Yeah, it’s pretty awesome. But I might be moving in a different direction soon.”

The doors opened, and Georgie fished the room key out of her back pocket.

“What kind of direction?” Ashley knew from experience that Georgie could go in a million different directions and still land on her feet. “Surgeon? Astronaut? Real estate agent to the stars?”

“Even better. TV show host.”

Ashley stopped in her tracks and gaped. “Are you kidding me?”

Georgie laughed and unlocked the door. “Cross my heart. Part of the Ibiza trip was an audition.”

“What kind of show? Talk? Cooking? America’s Next Top Club Promoter?”

Georgie pulled Ashley into the room and tossed the keycard on the entry table. It was a suite, sunny and spacious. She grabbed two beers from the minifridge and led the way to the balcony. “Come on, let’s gab out here.”

Ashley waited approximately half a second after her butt hit the chair cushion to start the inquisition. “How did it go? What’s the show about? When will you find out? How did this happen?”

Georgie squinted in concentration. “Um, good. Travel for the party set. Approximately 30 seconds before you walked in the lobby. And a friend of a friend of a boss.”

“You got it?”

Georgie took a dainty sip from the bottle. “They offered it to me and gave me 24 hours to think about it.”

“Holy crap. My best friend is going to be on TV.”

“Hey, I didn’t say yes yet!”

“Are you crazy? Georgie, you couldn’t possibly have designed a better job for yourself. You were born to do this!”

“Born to travel and party?”

“Don’t laugh it off and pretend this isn’t your freaking dream. This is an amazing opportunity!”

Georgie broke into a huge grin. “I know! I don’t think I let myself know how much I wanted it until I heard that it was mine.” She flopped back in her chair and sighed.

“Now tell me about your life. What’s going on?”

It was Ashley’s turn to sink back in her chair. “Ugh. I don’t even know where to start. I’m a mess.”

“ASAP, how bad could it be? You are a master of disaster. You can see your way through anything.”

“Steven’s cheating on me with a woman from work, and they are both involved with some kind of illegal business deal and their boss and an incredibly hot, devious security expert want me to play spy to help them build a case against him.”

Georgie sat in slack-jawed silence.

“Are you OK? Do you need some water or something?” Ashley offered.

Georgie shook her head and only then closed her mouth. “Uhhh. Hmm.” She took a hasty swig of her beer. “I don’t know what to say. I thought you were going to tell me that you were thinking about breaking your engagement or something.”

“Well, I am, obviously.”

“Umm ... I ...”

“I feel like you’re taking this worse than I did.”

“When did you find out? What’s the asshole woman like? I don’t know whether to hope that she’s hideous-looking or horribly beautiful. Which is better for you? And are you up for spy games? Also, exactly how hot is the devious security expert?”

“Last night. Horribly beautiful and I’m not sure which would be worse either. I have no idea how to spy. And, oh so incredibly hot. Thank God he’s completely ruthless and untrustworthy or I might have let him have his way with me on the racquetball court.”

Georgie was gaping at her again. “I think I’m going to call room service for some pizza and more beer and you’d better start from the beginning.”

###

“Well, you don’t look like a woman scorned,” Georgie said, eyeing up Ashley’s reflection. “You look like a glamazon who’s out to destroy and conquer.”

“You don’t think it’s a bit much ... or maybe not enough?” Ashley fingered the hem of the tribal print mini. It peeked out from under the silky black tank with a banded back that revealed a bit more skin than she was used to. Sky-high strappy sandals wrapped her calves gladiator-style.

Her hair was artfully disheveled in soft, beachy waves courtesy of Georgie’s ceramic curling iron. Smokey eye make-up and dark lips gave her a dangerous-looking edge.

They had splurged on mani/pedis in the hotel spa after the beer and pizza. While Georgie had gone for disco ball silver, Ashley went with a metallic black to match her mood.

Georgie joined her in front of the mirror. Her gold-fringed mini dress clung to exactly all the right spots. “Damn, we’re hot. Watch out Wilmington.”

Ashley laughed and let the feeling push back against the cold, dark knot in her stomach. Tonight was for forgetting about yesterday and not worrying about tomorrow.

###

Launch lived up to Georgie's predictions. It was loud, crowded, and dark. The perfect recipe for success on the club scene.

Purple neon bounced off of glass and stainless steel at the bar. The beat of the music hammered in Ashley's head, making it impossible to think about anything.

Perched on clear acrylic stools, Ashley handed Georgie a shot of tequila.

"To us." She raised her glass to her friend's.

"Long may we reign," Georgie yelled over the music.

Ashley knocked back her shot and reached for a lemon slice. "I seem to remember liking these better in college," she wheezed.

Georgie snorted through her lemon. "We were younger and dumber back then."

The bartender set two more shots in front of them.

"To younger and dumber," Ashley toasted.

"Cheers!"

Georgie pushed her empty glass to the service bar. "I'm going to go scope out the ladies' room and then see if I can find the shift manager to get some info. Are you OK by yourself for a little while?"

"I'm going to have a nice, delicious ice water and go check out the view from the balcony. Meet you back here?"

"Perfect! Do me a favor and get a pic of the dance floor from upstairs. I want to see how the lights look from above."

"You got it," Ashley said with an exaggerated wink.

Georgie gave her a thumb's up before disappearing into the crowd.

Ashley flagged the bartender down for a bottle of water and turned to survey the scene. Between flashes of light from the dance floor, she watched the anonymous bodies writhe together in a wave.

It was a good place to be a stranger.

So why did she feel so vulnerable?

She slid off the barstool and paused to shrug off the happy spin of tequila. The beers from earlier in the evening and two shots put her close to her no-hangover limit.

She decided to move and hydrate. Ashley made her way around the dance floor toward the stairs that led up to the second level.

A pair of hands preceded by a pungent cologne cloud snaked out of the crowd to grab her hips from behind.

“No thanks.” Ashley briskly slapped the hands away and kept walking. She rolled her eyes. There was something about darkness in clubs that made people more brave. And more stupid.

She gingerly took the red-carpeted stairs one at a time. Between the shoes and the booze she was feeling a little unsteady.

“Hey.”

A lifeguard-looking guy with muscles barely restrained by his black t-shirt nodded at her when they passed on the stairs.

“Hey,” she nodded back, nonchalantly.

He winked and continued his descent.

Ashley grinned. She could totally do the single thing again. Piece of cake.

Except the anxiety over first dates. And the bad blind dates. And the fact that she’d be expected to spend every Friday and Saturday night, for the foreseeable future, out instead of curled up on the couch in pajama pants.

Damn. There were upsides to long-term monogamous relationships. Just not the one she was currently in. Or pretending to be in.

Ashley shook her head. Too many thoughts, not enough tequila. She’d snap a picture from the balcony and then find the second floor bar.

She put her water glass down on a cocktail table next to the railing and fumbled for her phone in her clutch.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and the spot between her shoulder blades tingled. She knew what that meant. Danger.

Ashley whirled around.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jason leaned casually on the other side of the table.

Dressed in another suit — this time sans tie — he had a beer in his hand and an unreadable expression on his perfect face.

They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds. Ashley crossed her arms. “I take it this isn’t a coincidence?”

He pulled a phone from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. Georgie’s Facebook status was on the screen. “Happy hour(s) with ASAP. Let the tequila flow at Launch!”

“Is there a reason you’re stalking me through my Facebook friends? How did you know ASAP was me?”

He raised an eyebrow and Ashley rolled her eyes. “Right, security expert. I forgot.”

“Do you really think it’s a good idea for you to be wandering around a club by yourself, half drunk?” His tone was clipped.

Ashley snorted. She was way more than half drunk. “I don’t see how it’s any of your concern.”

He rounded the table, stepping between her and the railing. She frowned up at him. “I’m off the job for tonight, *boss*.”

“I can see that. I’m wondering if you’re off the job permanently.”

“You’re starting to really piss me off.” She jutted out her chin. “I don’t have to justify to you how I spend my time.”

“Holy fireworks.” Georgie magically appeared at Ashley’s side. “I leave you alone for five minutes and you pick a fight with Tall Dark and Angry.”

“For you.” She handed Ashley one of the cosmos she was carrying and then extended her now empty hand to Jason.

“I’m Georgie, the keeper of this lovely lady tonight.”

He took her hand. “Perhaps you should try keeping her a little closer. She was wandering around here alone.” Jason’s tone was cool, and Ashley wondered if he was the one man on the planet immune to Georgie’s charm.

“You don’t have to be rude, Jason. Georgie, this is Jason the hot, devious security guy. Jason, this is my best friend, Georgie, who knows that I’m completely capable of taking care of myself. Now if you’ll excuse us. We have many beverages to consume.”

She clinked her glass to Georgie’s. “Cheers,” they said in unison.

Ashley sipped deeply.

“So you’re *that* Jason,” Georgie said, eyeing him over her glass. “Interesting.”

“Hot, devious security guy?” His mouth quirked. “Should I add that to my business cards?”

“Don’t take it as a compliment,” Ashley frowned. “I’m not feeling very complimentary toward you right now.”

Jason smiled, but his phone signaled. Glancing at it, he frowned. “I have to take this. Will you please wait here?”

“See. Why don’t you start all of your conversations that way? It’s so much more pleasant.”

Taking that for a yes, Jason paced away to deal with the phone call.

Georgie smacked her shoulder. “*That* is super hot security guy?”

“Yep.” Ashley glumly took a large gulp of cosmo. “And he’s not happy that I’m here jeopardizing his plan.”

“Did he say that?”

“I don’t know. It was more like ‘I’m Jason Baine. I’m very tall and angry. You should feel bad. Blah blah blah.’”

Georgie dissolved into a fit of laughter. “Oh my God, I’ve missed you! Especially drunk you.”

“I missed you, too! What am I going to do while you’re off gallivanting all over the world?”

“Gallivanting? That’s a lot of syllables for someone in your condition.”

They were still laughing when Jason returned, stowing his phone in his jacket pocket. “Ladies, I would like to apologize for getting off on the wrong foot. I was concerned because any woman — no matter how capable — alone in an environment like this can still be at risk. Can we start over, and may I join you?”

“Please excuse me while I confer with my colleague,” Ashley said snootily.

The two women turned their backs on him and began whispering. They nodded and turned as one to face him.

“Your apology will be accepted, and you will be allowed to join us if you meet the following criteria,” Ashley announced.

“One, you will take a picture of us because, let’s face it, we look awesome and our arms aren’t long enough to capture the head-to-toe awesome in a selfie,” Georgie said.

“And two, you will go to the bartender and order a strawberry daiquiri with extra whip cream, which you will then drink.” Ashley said, crossing her arms. “Do you accept these terms?”

Jason bit back a sigh. “Give me your phone.”

###

He was a surprisingly good sport, Ashley thought, hand under her chin, as she watched Jason suck down the last of his daiquiri.

“Good?”

“It’s actually not bad.” He gazed into the glass, frowning.

“Just wait until the sugar rush hits you,” Georgie warned. “If you drink more than one of those an hour you might end up in a diabetic coma.”

Jason pushed the glass away. “Good to know. So, now what?”

“Now we dance!” Georgie pushed back from the table. “We finally have a bodyguard, ASAP!”

Ashley laughed. “It’s nice to have a guy on the floor or lurking nearby so strangers don’t get too, um, hands-y,” she explained. She pulled him with her as she followed Georgie toward the stairs.

“Are you a dancer or a lurker?” she asked over her shoulder as they descended.

“What?”

The music was pulsing at brain-vibrating levels.

Ashley stopped suddenly on the last step and Jason gripped her shoulders to steady her. She leaned back against him. The alcohol made him slightly less scary and even more ... desirable.

“I said, are you a dancer or a lurker?”

“Let’s find out.”

Ashley caught up with Georgie, and together they wound their way through the bodies on the floor to the center.

She noted that Jason had stationed himself at the bar. Watching.

“Looks like your friend can’t hang,” Georgie shouted over the music.

Ashley shook her head and relaxed into the music. “I’m not surprised. No one can look that good in a suit *and* dance.”

“Are you going to sleep with him?”

Ashley tripped over her feet. “What?”

Georgie leaned in. “You heard me! Are you?”

“Oh my God, Georgie!”

“Oh my God is right!” Swaying to the music she ticked points off on her fingers. “He’s gorgeous. He knows your engagement is non-existent. He cares enough to stalk you to a club and babysit you. And he can’t take his eyes off of you.”

Ashley shot a peek in his direction. And met his gaze.

“Ash, he *smolders*.”

“Yeah —” He really did. “But I can’t just sleep with him. I haven’t even gotten out of the relationship I’m in.”

“Steven has already exited the relationship.”

“I know that!” Ashley’s voice battled the music. “But look at him. How would I hold my own? I get overwhelmed just having a conversation with him. And I don’t know if I can trust him.”

“There are some men you don’t have to hold your own with. You just be you, let him be him, and enjoy this gift from God to make up for the shitstorm you’re in now.”

“So you’re saying I’d be stupid not to?”

“Never stupid, my lovely friend. Just chicken.”

“Bock. Bock. I’m just not ready yet. And I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready for someone as smolder-y as Jason Baine.”

“I can respectfully disagree, but still support your decision,” Georgie sighed.

“That’s fair of you.”

The song changed and Georgie squealed. “I love this song!” A man in a pink fedora caught her eye. “You in the hat,” she bellowed. “You know this one don’t you?”

Ashley laughed and watched Georgie and her new friend weave and slide in a complicated step.

She threw her hands up and swayed to the beat. Music therapy.

Hands slid around her waist from behind. But they weren’t the right hands. Sweaty palms and thick fingers squeezed her hips.

Ashley stepped out of the grip and turned. Her uninvited partner was no Jason Baine. A few sheets to the wind and barely taller than she was, he was glistening under a beady layer of sweat.

When he reached for her again Ashley shook her head. “No thanks.”

“Come on, baby.” He made a grab for her arm, and Ashley side-stepped him.

“Still no.”

Another pair of hands settled on her hips. The right ones.

She felt the energy and the heat slide through her.

“Leave. Now.” Jason didn’t have to shout over the music. The message was received loud and clear and her sweaty friend beat a hasty retreat.

He turned her around and pulled her in close. After the shortest hesitation she brought her arms around his neck. Even in her heels, she had to lean her head back to look at him.

They moved together to the beat. His hands roamed her back, and she enjoyed the shiver of skin on skin contact.

“Thank you, but it wasn’t necessary.”

“I’m sure you can take care of yourself, but I thought I would streamline the process.”

“I appreciate the thought.”

“When I see you make dangerous choices, it worries me.”

“I’m not going to jeopardize the mission. It’s just a night out with my friend.”

“I’m not concerned with the mission. I’m worried about you. I want you to be safe.”

“Why should you care when my own fiancé doesn’t?”

“I care about what happens to you,” he reached out and traced her jaw line with his finger.

Ashley felt the blush warm her cheeks. Her bare knees brushed the inside of his pant legs.

“I don’t know what to say to that. What I do with my time isn’t really your concern.”

“Yet it still concerns me.”

“So where does that leave us?”

“In a strange situation.” This time he ran the pad of his thumb over her lower lip. She considered it a victory when she didn’t let it tremble.

Her lips parted and she touched her tongue to his skin for just a second. She saw the change in his eyes. The sharpening. Jason pulled her tighter against him, trailing his hand down her jaw to her neck.

“Guys!”

Ashley guiltily jumped back and into Georgie. They tangled and almost went down in a heap before Jason reached out to steady them.

“I can see it’s time for another round of drinks,” he said wryly.

“Let’s make it a last call round,” Georgie suggested. “I’ve got a family breakfast tomorrow that I don’t want to be hung-over for.”

Jason gave Ashley’s arm a silent squeeze. “I’ll get the drinks.” He disappeared into the crowd.

“What was *that*?” Ashley smacked Georgie’s arm.

Georgie smacked her back. “What was what?”

“I was going to kiss him. I was in the process of getting ready to kiss him, and you interrupted on purpose!”

“Uh, yeah! He looked like he was going to eat you alive, and you just got done telling me you weren’t ready.”

“Didn’t you just get done telling me to be ready?”

“I am trying to be respectful of my friend’s questionable life choices.”

Ashley groaned. “Thanks. I think.”

“How about a compromise? Sleep on it tonight before deciding whether or not you’re a giant chicken depriving herself of ...” she glanced over her shoulder to where Jason stood at the bar. “What could be one of life’s finest pleasures.”

Ashley followed her gaze. “Do you think we’re building this up to be some ridiculous fantasy that reality could never live up to?”

“Nope. Most epic sex ever.”

Ashley sighed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

They did their final shots and Jason carefully poured them into a cab and sent them back to Georgie’s hotel, but not before making her promise she would text when they got into the room.

Ashley didn’t bother asking him how he knew where she was staying. She was too busy holding the hand he had kissed to her mouth as she gazed out the window.

“You’re spending the night, right?” Georgie demanded.

“I can’t let you enjoy that amazing hotel suite all by yourself now can I?”

She felt warm and sleepy and ... cared for.

“Awesome,” Georgie said in a sing-song voice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A whistling Steven woke Ashley from a reasonably erotic dream about Jason.

“Babe. Wake up. Are you coming?”

She was just about to in the dream, before the interruption.

“Mmmph,” Ashley mumbled into her pillow. She wasn’t prepared to give up the dream and face her reality. Georgie’s alarm had gone off at 6:30 that morning and Ashley decided to do the “walk of shame” home rather than staying until check out. She had crawled into bed just after 7 to catch a few more hours of sleep.

“Come on, babe. Blueberry pancakes? Bacon? Lots of coffee?”

Ashley rolled onto her side. “Brunch?” What had once been a weekly tradition for them had fizzled this year into a something they “used to do.”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen much of you lately and my tee time’s not until 1. Come on, it’ll be like old times.”

Not likely, Ashley thought. She was torn. The last thing she wanted to do was spend a leisurely Sunday morning meal with Steven. But what better way to get information than from the stupid horse’s mouth?

She sighed into her pillow. “Give me 10 minutes and I’ll be ready.”

Ashley waited until she heard him leave before sitting up.

Ashley dragged herself out of bed and pulled on clean yoga pants and a soft long-sleeve tee in royal blue. She piled her hair on her head in a messy knot, added a coat of mascara to her lashes and layered a scarf around her neck.

She found Steven in the living room dressed in khaki pants and a polo shirt. He quickly slid his phone in his pocket when he spotted her. It was something he had done a million times before, only now she knew what it meant.

When had her common sense completely abandoned her? The signs were so obvious now that she was even angrier with herself for not picking up on it on her own. It took a mega-millionaire with a racquetball court to point out the painfully obvious.

She pasted a smile on her face. “Ready to go?”

“Is that what you’re wearing?” He eyed her outfit critically.

Two days ago that judgment would have sent her hustling back to the closet.

“Yep.” She breezed past him, grabbing her wallet and phone off of the kitchen island. “Let’s go.”

Normally she would argue that they should walk the four blocks to Randolph House, but today with a dull headache and a new reason to avoid fights, Ashley just hid behind oversized sunglasses and slid into the passenger seat.

“So who’s golfing today?”

She settled back against the leather seat and let Steven ramble on about his foursome.

###

Ashley took a bite of bacon and looked at Steven. Really looked at him. His light hair was getting a little long. There was a slight curl to the ends, which usually signaled a haircut was on the schedule.

His shirt was neatly pressed, and Ashley wondered if he had taken up ironing or if he had just decided to start having all of his clothing dry-cleaned. He was wearing a watch that Ashley had never seen before. A very nice watch.

“Nice watch,” she said, gesturing with the bacon at the flashy stainless unit on his wrist.

Steven glanced down at it and adjusted the gold band on his wrist. “Thanks. It’s new.”

“Can I see it?”

He extended his arm, and Ashley pulled his hand closer. It was the first time she had voluntarily touched him since she found out. She tried not to think about how much she wanted to snap his forearm in half and instead studied the watch face.

It was a Rolex.

“I thought I’d treat myself to something new.”

He thought he would treat himself to a Rolex? There was no way in hell he could afford a brand new Rolex. “It’s, uh, really nice.”

He pulled his arm back and took a gulp of orange juice. “Thanks. I figured since things are going well I deserved something nice.”

The guy who borrowed \$20 off of her last week to pay the pizza delivery guy deserved a gold Rolex.

Ashley was willing to bet that the watch came from a certain ice-cold blonde. Maybe it was a “thanks for breaking the law and cheating on your fiancée with me” gift. A double punch in the gut since Ashley had saved for months to buy him his last watch for graduation. At the time, a \$500 watch had seemed like a priceless treasure.

Ashley bit her tongue and focused on her omelet.

“So what’s happening at work these days? Are you still looking at other options?”

Oblivious, Steven carved up his sausage with enthusiasm. “Yeah, I’m looking at a couple of opportunities. One in particular.”

“Is it in the city?”

“Initially, but there’s a possibility of relocation.”

Ashley just stared at him. “Uh-huh.” A hundred snarky comments ran through her mind. The guy was thinking of picking up and moving and hadn’t thought to mention it to her? The woman he was supposed to marry? No thought given to her job, her life here in the city —

Maybe he was planning on moving with someone else.

She took a deep, quiet breath. “Is there a timeline on that? Do you know when the offer will come through?”

“Couple of weeks. Probably by the end of next month.”

Ashley’s fork slipped out of her hand and clattered on the plate.

“Wow, that’s soon,” she cleared her throat and reached for her coffee.

Steven shrugged as he plowed his way through his pancakes. “It’s time for a change, don’t you think?”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

The waitress had cleared their plates and was returning with the check when Steven’s phone rang. He glanced at the screen and hastily stood up.

“I gotta take this, babe. Do you mind getting the check?” He turned and headed toward the bar without waiting for an answer. “Hey, yeah. No it’s not a bad time.”

Ashley rolled her eyes and reached for her wallet. Her phone signaled on the table.

You looked beautiful last night. How are you feeling?

Ashley couldn't stop the smile or the warm feeling in her chest as she read Jason's text. Damn it. She was going to sleep with him. And it was going to be amazing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Since she had the rest of her Sunday free, Ashley decided to change and go into the store for a few hours to get a head start on the next week's paperwork.

The more she got done now, the more time she could devote to stalking Steven while he was at work. The store was only open until 3, so she could keep Janice company for a bit before hibernating in the back office.

Dressed in black slimcut capris and a simple black boatneck sweater, Ashley deemed herself respectable enough for customers and comfortable enough for any bending and lifting that might be required.

Ashley found Janice helping the very pregnant Magda Olson, a vascular surgeon with impeccable taste.

"Dr. Olson! You look wonderful! How much longer?" Ashley asked, pointing at the baby bump.

"Two more weeks! Janice was just showing me these watercolor prints. What do you think of them for the nursery?"

Ashley eyed the dreamy seascapes with their slashes of greens and blues. "Do you still have the picture of the nursery on your phone?"

"Of course! Why didn't I think of that? Ugh, baby brain. Here it is!" Triumphant, she pulled her phone from the depths of her leather tote and swiped through her pictures. "Aha!"

Ashley glanced at the screen and back again at the prints. "Dr. Olson, these are perfect! It's like they were painted for your room."

Dr. Olson did a little shimmy. "Wrap 'em up, ladies! The nursery is officially done."

Laughing, Janice led the doctor to the register while Ashley stayed behind to rearrange the display. The inventory on the prints was getting a little low, and she made a mental note to reach out to the artist to see if he had anything else ready for them.

Ashley spent the next hour helping out with a handful of customers before heading back to the office.

She emailed the watercolor artist while it was still fresh in her mind and then opened up the financials. The past month had seemed busier than usual, and she wanted to see if the figures agreed.

Barbara would be very pleased, Ashley thought as she worked her way through the weeks. They were already over last year's total for the month and there were still two weeks left.

They were probably ready to hire another part-time staffer to help cover the weekends, especially with summer on the way. Ashley was writing up an employment ad to send to Barbara for approval when the desk phone rang.

"What's up?"

"Yes, I was just checking to see if Mr. Donahue's order was in yet?" Janice's voice was breezy and professional, but Ashley could hear the smile in it.

She laughed into the receiver. "Mr. Donahue" was code for "come out and see something funny/sexy/weird."

"On my way!" Ashley hung up and hurried out.

The last time there was a Mr. Donahue, it was a woman with two tiny Yorkies in matching argyle sweaters.

Ashley headed straight for Janice behind the register. "What is it?" she whispered. Janice didn't take her eyes off the front of the store, but nodded in that direction.

It wasn't a tiny dog. It was a tall man in an impeccable suit.
Jason.

Ashley tried to ignore the butterflies that instantly took flight.

"I asked him if I could help him find anything, but he said he was just looking. Would you mind if I eloped with him and took a few weeks off from work for a honeymoon to end all honeymoons?"

"Go right ahead, but let me talk to your groom first."

Janice fanned herself with a brochure. "Don't get too close. You might get singed."

"You're not kidding," Ashley said under her breath. She left the safety of the counter and crossed to him. Even on a Sunday, he was in suit. Today's was a crisp navy.

He turned toward her as if sensing her. "Hello."

What was it about that voice? Like whiskey by firelight.

“Hi. What are you doing here?” Ashley kept her tone low and busied her hands by rearranging the soy candle display.

“I was in the neighborhood before a meeting and found myself in need of a gift.”

“And so you came here?”

“It came highly recommended by the manager.”

Ashley smiled wryly. “Well, you can’t beat that. What kind of gift, and who is the lucky recipient? And is it safe for us to be seen together?”

“So many questions.” Jason picked up a sandalwood candle and sniffed. “Something shiny and fussy for a woman who has been my right-hand for nine years. And as long as you can control yourself and not tear my clothes off, we should be fine.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “I’ll try to keep my baser instincts at bay,” she said dryly.

She noticed Janice across the store performing an exaggerated fanning motion from behind the counter.

“Why don’t we look over here?” Ashley pointed toward the far side of the store, out of sight of Janice.

She guided them around the divider wall currently used as gallery space for black and white scenes of the River Walk.

Jason glanced around at the corner displays. “This must be your shiny and fussy section.”

Vibrant candleholders, glittery napkin rings, small tiled mirrors, and hand-painted barware mingled on shelves and tabletops in a riot of color and shine.

“I don’t know where to look first,” he said.

Ashley laughed. “That’s usually what men say when they visit this part of the store. Tell me more about your right hand.”

“Her name is Mona. She’ll be 59 on Monday, she gives her annual bonus to her favorite animal shelter, enjoys cheap wine in crystal glasses, and sponsors a high school student at a local art camp every summer. And if she ever retires I’ll be lost without her.”

Ashley clasped her hands together. “She sounds wonderful. I think I have the perfect thing.” She moved to a primitive hutch and gently lifted a glass vase from the shelf. “This is a hand-blown bell vase made out of recycled glass. It was made by a woman in Swaziland. In Africa. Her village collects glass bottles and she turns them into treasures.”

Jason took the vase from her and held it up to the light. It was heavy, but with flowing fluted curves were almost sensual. The flecks of bubbles beneath the surface gave the piece charm.

“Perfect. Now what do we put in it?”

“Calla lilies. Pink.” Ashley said with a nod. “We work with a florist on the next block over who does beautiful arrangements. I have his card at the register.”

“You’re very good at this.”

“Thank you. We take finding the perfect gift pretty seriously here.”

He handed the vase back to her. “How do you feel today?” He kept his voice low, his eyes on her face.

Standing so close with fingers touching on the cool glass, Ashley felt the goose bumps rise on her skin.

Too many complications. Keep it simple, she ordered herself.

“I have a little headache, but that’s more from brunch than last night.”

“Did you both survive brunch?”

“Barely. He’s wearing a new Rolex, which I think might be a gift, and he’s expecting a job offer by the end of next month.”

Jason nodded and mulled over the information. “So it sounds like our timeline just got tighter. Have dinner with me tonight. We can discuss what I need you to look for.”

Ashley raised an eyebrow. “Dinner? Why not just text me?”

He smiled and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “You have to eat don’t you? Consider this multi-tasking.”

“Hmm,” she tapped a finger to her chin. “I guess it all comes down to where we’re going for dinner.”

“My house?”

“Nice try, champ. No.”

Jason sighed. “Fine. I’ll take you out. In public. Where you can’t maul me.”

Ashley nodded. “Then I accept your invitation.”

He grinned. “I thought you might. It’s hard to resist a hot, devious security guy.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “I knew that one would come back to bite me. You’re lucky my only other dinner option is with Steven, and one meal with him was enough. Especially when I had to pick up the check while he took a call from his girlfriend.”

“Remember, my shovel is at your disposal. Just try not to need it until we have enough to nail them to a wall.” He glanced discreetly at his watch. “Do you mind ringing me up before I go? I can pick you up back here at 6.”

She felt a little tickle of disappointment and immediately quashed it. She didn’t like that there was something electric about being close to him. Her heart beat a little faster and her senses were a bit sharper when he was in the room. But maybe that was because she still felt like prey around him.

Simple. Simple, simple, simple.

“Sure,” she smiled brightly. “We do very nice gift wrapping, but if you’re going to get Mona the flowers it would make more of a statement if it was all put together on her desk when she comes in on Monday.”

“Good point.”

She led him back to the register ... and Janice.

“Janice, this is Mr. Baine.”

Janice gave him a dazzling smile. “Good afternoon, Mr. Baine. You have excellent taste,” she nodded at the vase.

“Thank you, Janice. I just went with the expert’s opinion.”

“That’s usually the safest bet around here,” she laughed. “And what will be going in it?”

“Calla lilies,” Ashley said, as she peeled off the discreet price tag.

“Pink.” Jason supplied.

Janice nodded her approval and nudged Ashley with her foot.

“Janice, could you give Mr. Baine Lorenzo’s card?” Ashley punctuated her request by stepping on Janice’s foot.

“Certainly,” she chirped. “Lorenzo is wonderful, Mr. Baine.”

Ashley gave Jason the total, noting that the amount — high enough to purchase a very respectable pair of Ferragamos — didn’t even warrant a blink.

He scrawled his signature across the receipt and handed the pen back to Ashley, fingers lingering. “Thank you for your help.”

Ashley tried to ignore the humming in her ears as their gazes held and fingers brushed.

He strolled to the door leaving, Ashley and Janice watching him.

“Who was that? How do you know him? And how did you not melt into a puddle just now?”

Ashley blew out a breath and braced herself against the counter. “So it’s not just me? He’s really that intensely hot?”

“I have traveled all over this world and dated many, many, *many* handsome men. And I can say definitively that that is the hottest man on the planet. I repeat, how do you know him?”

“I met him at some cocktail party Friday night for Steven’s work.”

“You met him Friday and he showed up here today? He is clearly into you. What does Steven say? Oh, screw Steven. Put him next to Mr. Hot Body, and he looks like a garden gnome.”

Ashley snorted in spite of herself. Janice’s opinion of Steven hadn’t been very high since he stood Ashley up on Valentine’s Day last year. He went for drinks after work and didn’t make it home until the next morning.

She thought about explaining the situation to Janice, but decided against it. The fewer people who knew what was going on, the better it would be. And the faster it could be over.

###

Ashley closed the office door and leaned against it. She wished she could shut everything out of her mind as easily.

Anger over Steven and his infidelity warred with too many thoughts about Jason. She didn’t know what was happening there, but she was entirely too preoccupied with him. Visions crowded her mind. His face, those piercing eyes, the feeling she got when she found him watching her.

She shook her head to clear it. The absolute last thing she needed in her life right now was some overblown infatuation, she cautioned herself.

“There is no room in your life for someone like Jason Baine,” she reminded herself. His presence was too big, too powerful. She could lose herself there.

Maybe dinner tonight was a bad idea.

Her phone on the desk buzzed. A text from Steven.

Won’t be home for dinner. Late meeting.

She was pretty sure she knew what kind of a late meeting Steven would be having on a Sunday. It made her skin crawl. How many times had he touched her after coming home from being with Victoria?

Well, now there was no reason not to go to dinner with Jason.

“It’s just dinner,” she whispered. She could do this.

She could keep a safe distance from Jason no matter what happened physically, and cut Steven out of her life. And start over.

Ashley texted Steven back.

OK. Good luck. See you when you get home!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She left the store to run some errands after closing. She caught the tail end of the farmer's market and stocked up on a few things for lunches. Then she hit the drugstore to pick up a prescription and ended up buying half of the cosmetics aisle to spice up her look before "just dinner." There wasn't enough time to run home to change clothes, but at least her face could look fancier.

"It's just dinner, it's no big deal," she chanted, applying a rosy shade to her lips and smudged eyeliner into her lash line.

She returned to the store floor to finish unpacking a small delivery and add the new items to the system. The display of hand-painted dishes was taking shape and she was sure pieces would be walking out the door starting Monday morning.

Startled by a knock on the glass, she turned and took a deep breath. Jason was at the door. Waiting.

Ashley unlocked the door and held it open for him. He was still in his suit and Ashley felt a little self-conscious about her clothing choice. "We're not going anywhere fancy are we?" She glanced down at her outfit and ballet flats.

He slid his hands in pockets. "You're more than fine."

"We look like we're going to two different dinners."

Jason studied her for a beat and then loosened his tie. He pulled it off, stuffed it into his jacket pocket, and then undid the top button of his crisp white shirt.

"Better?"

Ashley couldn't help but stare at the hint of skin. "Much."

He glanced around the darkened store. "Do you need to do anything before we go?"

She locked the front door. "Let me grab my bag and arm the alarm. We can go out the back." She led the way past the register and down the hallway to the office. He waited in the doorway, making the tiny space feel even more

crowded. Ashley tossed her phone into the clutch and switched off the desk lamp, sending the room into darkness. Fumbling for the keys, she turned and ran solidly into him.

He steadied her with his hands, his face shrouded in darkness. The only illumination was the red glow behind him from the dull exit sign in the hallway.

Ashley could feel his breath on her upturned face. Her pulse quickened. He was so close. The heat pumping off of his body warmed her palms through his shirt. He smelled like soap and spices.

“Why do we keep ending up here?”

“You know why.” His mouth was just a whisper away from her lips. His long fingers flexed their grip on her arms.

Ashley could hear her blood pumping in her head. “Don’t you think this is a really stupid idea?”

His breath was hot on her skin. “Yes, it is.” He released her arms but captured her hand when she started to step back. Jason turned it palm up and lowered his lips to the center. “I want to see you when I touch you the first time.”

Ashley’s fingers went lax and her clutch plummeted to the floor. Her palm tingled from his kiss, and she knew with certainty that’s how every inch of her body would react to those perfect lips.

She jerked her hand away and stepped back. “The darkness isn’t the stupid idea I was referring to.”

Jason stood with his arms crossed. In silhouette, he was even more intimidating.

Ashley switched the lamp back on. Now she could see rather than just feel the intensity of his gaze.

“Do you really think that us hooking up when I’m supposed to be helping you spy on my fiancé is a good idea?”

“Are you that afraid of me that you think one little kiss would end in catastrophe?” he countered.

“Yes.”

Jason laughed.

“And don’t think for one second that I believe that it would be ‘one little kiss.’ I don’t know what this is,” she gestured between them, “but I know it’s something and you’re aware of it, too. And we both know it’s got disaster written all over it.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.” Jason put his palms up when she started to argue. “Come on. Let’s go. I’m hungry.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. She snatched her clutch off the floor and snapped off the light. “Come on, Romeo.”

Jason watched her double check that the exit door bar was locked before she entered the code in the ancient keypad. Once outside in the alley, she leaned heavily against the door and then tested the handle.

He ran his fingers over gouge marks dug in the doorframe.

“We had a break in last year,” Ashley explained.

“Do you always leave through the back?”

Ashley stashed her keys in her bag and nodded. “There’s only 20 seconds between setting the alarm and it arming, so it’s not enough time to make it back to the front of the store.”

“There’s not a lot of light back here,” he noted, glancing around the alley as they walked toward the next cross street.

“It’s fine this time of year. It’s mostly daylight when we close.”

“Where do you park?”

“In the garage two blocks over. Barbara, the owner, got us all cans of mace and little LED flashlights for when we close after dark.”

Jason said nothing. He walked shoulder to shoulder with her, hands in his pockets again.

“Is the big, bad security expert judging our setup?” Ashley teased.

“There is always room for improvement.”

They rounded the corner onto the side street and turned again into the hustle and bustle of storefronts and restaurants and the Saturday evening crowd. Jason guided her, a hand at the small of her back, toward a sleek, black four-door parked at the curb. Ashley goggled at the emblem on the hood.

“Is this a freaking Tesla?”

Jason smiled, eyes crinkling behind his aviators. “Yes. This is a freaking Tesla.” He opened the passenger door for her, and Ashley slid onto the two-tone leather seat.

“Do you mind if I make out with your car?” she asked when he settled behind the wheel.

“No, but you might have more fun driving it.”

“Don’t tease me about driving a Tesla, Jason.”

He grinned. "We'll see how dinner goes." He started the nearly silent engine and smoothly pulled away from the curb.

"So, where are we going? I'm not up on my spy etiquette. Is it safe to be seen together?"

"Given the situation, I thought it would be smarter to keep a low profile."

Ashley leaned back against her seat to enjoy the ride. Forty-eight hours ago her life had been on a completely different path. And now? Now she was cruising out of Wilmington in a Tesla toward the unknown with a man she just met. One she wasn't sure she could trust.

They headed north, the coast unwinding on their right in the slanting evening light. The silence between them was heavy, but neither tried to break it.

The city was far behind them when Jason pulled into the gravel lot of a cozy beachfront café.

"Do you like seafood?" he asked.

"Almost as much as I like racquetball."

"Good."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The hostess, a runway model of a brunette, led them to a quiet table on the deck overlooking the ocean and hovered for a moment too long while Jason pulled out Ashley's chair. Ashley couldn't blame the girl. Jason Baine wasn't just easy on the eyes, he demanded their full attention.

He shed his jacket and hung it on the back of his chair. When he sat, he unbuttoned his cuffs and worked at rolling up his sleeves.

"I feel like I'm watching Jason the mogul morph into Jason the human being."

He raised an eyebrow and adjusted a cuff. "Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?"

"I'll let you know after dinner."

"Fair enough."

Their waiter, a gangly hipster, arrived with a pitcher of ice water and a plate of freshly baked rosemary bread. He pushed his black-rimmed glasses up his nose as he recited the specials with gusto.

She settled on a glass of white wine and the shrimp and asparagus special and amused herself with the dessert menu while Jason ordered.

"Did you have a good meeting?" She asked when the waiter left them.

"A productive one." He drizzled olive oil over a slice of bread and dropped it neatly on her plate.

"Is that the same thing as good?" Suddenly aware of the lunch she had skipped, Ashley sampled the bread and sighed. "Oh my God, that's delicious."

Jason raised an eyebrow and helped himself to a slice. "Damn. That is good. And yes, the meeting went well."

"I can imagine you have some interesting meetings on Sunday afternoons in your field."

"Almost as interesting as the ones that take place at 3 in the morning. Security threats never sleep."

"I assume neither do the ones trying to prevent them."

The waiter returned with their drinks.

“How was your day?” he asked.

Ashley blinked over her wineglass. When was the last time a man had asked her that over dinner?

“It had its ups and downs.”

“Which one is this?” Jason asked.

“I’m withholding judgment until the shrimp gets here, but so far consider yourself an up.”

“How were things at home?”

Ashley leaned back in her chair and toyed with the base of her wineglass. “Hard.”

“I can imagine.”

“Can you? Have you ever lived with someone whose utter disregard for your feelings suddenly became so clear you felt like an idiot for not seeing it sooner?”

“Yes, but that’s not why we’re here, Ashley.”

Ashley leaned forward and cupped her chin in her hands. “Why don’t you tell me why we’re here?”

“I need your help.”

“You seem to have a lot of resources at your disposal. Why exactly do you need me?”

Jason paused as if weighing his words carefully. “You can get closer to certain information than I can.”

“Information that you think Steven has.”

Jason nodded.

“And you think he’ll be an easier target than Victoria.”

“I know he will be.”

“So through Steven, you’re hoping to get to Victoria.”

“Yes.”

Ashley took a gulp of wine. She hated putting those two names together in a sentence. A flash of them wrapped around each other on Jason’s security monitor sliced through her.

“You’re sure what they’re doing is illegal?”

“I can’t prove anything, yet. But yes, I’m sure.”

“What’s the end game here? What happens if I help you and we find the proof you need?”

“I’ll take what we have to the client — in this case my grandfather. And he will decide whether or not to go to the authorities.”

“Who are?”

“For something like insider training, the SEC and the FBI.”

Ashley froze with her glass halfway to her lips. Depending on his involvement, Steven could end up in jail. She was equal parts thrilled and horrified.

“I’m all for karma, but I’m not sure I’m comfortable being a tool of karma.”

Jason reached across the table and took her hand. “They’re breaking the law. And they obviously aren’t earning humanitarian awards in their personal lives either. They’re greedy and selfish and careless.”

Ashley stayed quiet, stomach and mind churning in unison.

“What information are you looking for? And how do I get it?”

Jason squeezed her hand before letting go. “We’ve already forensically imaged his work laptop.”

“Did you find anything?”

“A few things. Mostly just a ridiculous amount of porn.”

Ashley slammed her glass down.

Jason continued smoothly. “Ideally, we want to get access to his home computer and his cell phone. However, we can’t do that without going to the authorities first. And we can’t go to the authorities without proof. That’s where you come in.”

“You want me to do some good old-fashioned spying — following him, ‘accidentally’ reading his emails, checking his browser history — so you can get enough to get a warrant.”

“Essentially anything that a woman who suspects her significant other of cheating would do.”

“Well that shouldn’t be hard,” Ashley sighed. “What am I looking for?”

Jason took a sip of his beer. “Any kind of business communications with someone outside the company. New friends on Facebook, phone numbers that show up on his cell bill repeatedly. I’ll get you access to his work calendar so you’ll know what are legitimate meetings and what might be happening off the books.”

Any further comment was postponed by the arrival of their waiter, dinners in hand. He fussed over their plates for a moment before retreating to the kitchen.

“Enough shop talk,” Jason said, leaning forward. “It’s a beautiful night, let’s enjoy it.”

Ashley raised her glass. “To a beautiful night.”

He leaned forward and touched his glass to hers. “To us.”

“Go team,” Ashley said wryly and dug into her shrimp.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The strings of overhead lights came on as daylight shifted to dusk. The patio heaters and outdoor fireplace gave off a comfortable blanket of warmth.

They lingered over coffee and shared a piece of peanut butter pie enjoying the ocean view. “After Friday, I didn’t think I’d ever feel anything but angry again. And yet here I am licking chocolate syrup off my plate.” She ran her finger across the remains of an artful swirl and popped it into her mouth. “Yum.”

Jason was watching her. “How do you feel now?”

She was still angry. She was still attracted to Jason. And she still didn’t trust him. Either she was already gun shy or there was something there that she just wasn’t seeing, yet. Overall, the edge of adrenaline that fury gave her had faded, leaving her drained.

“Tired,” she sighed.

“That’s understandable.” His gaze held.

“I can’t tell what you’re thinking and I feel like I should.”

“Do you really want to know what I’m thinking?”

“I may regret this, but yes.”

“I’m thinking that Steven is an idiot.”

Ashley sighed and quietly savored the last sip of her wine.

The dishes were cleared, and the restaurant was slowly emptying when their waiter approached with the bill.

“Folks if you’re not in a hurry, we’re doing a little bonfire down by the water.” He pointed to the beach where there was already a handful of diners and staff clustered around the beginnings of a fire.

“Do you have time?” Jason eyed her across the table.

Ashley raised her eyebrows. “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s always time for a beach bonfire.”

Jason opened his wallet and handed over a credit card. “Put a bottle of what the lovely lady is drinking on the bill and we’ll take it with us.”

“Certainly, sir!”

“Let’s go to a bonfire.”

Wine and plastic cups in hand, they wandered off the deck and down the wooden stairs to the sand. They took off their shoes as the other guests had and wandered down the path through the dunes. The night’s cool, salty air teased goose bumps from Ashley’s skin. She rubbed her arms to ward off the chill. Jason draped an arm over her shoulders and pulled her into his side.

She welcomed the warmth as they walked.

The dunes gave way to a sandy beach with a throng of locals loosely ringing the now crackling bonfire.

Jason steered her closer and set the wine down in the sand. He turned her to face it. Ashley closed her eyes and let herself enjoy the heat surrounding her. Flames to the front and a smoldering man behind her. Was there a better place to be?

Safer, yes. But better?

He draped his jacket over her shoulders.

“Better?”

Ashley nodded and snuggled deeper into the jacket. She knew she was being seduced. And she knew she should put a stop to it. But knowing didn’t always translate to doing.

“The stars are coming out,” he said quietly.

Ashley followed his gaze to the inky blue night sky, dotted with hundreds of pinpoints of light.

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

She turned toward him and stopped. He wasn’t looking at the sky. He was watching her.

Ashley moved away. Self-preservation, she thought. “It looks like we get dinner and a show.”

Off the clock now, their waiter had joined the small group with guitar in hand and the willowy hostess in tow.

They plopped down on a log near the fire. When he started quietly strumming, she dropped her head to his shoulder and wiggled closer.

“Now that surprises me,” Jason laughed.

“Oh not me. Even without the bad boy part of the image, ‘musician’ still carries a lot of weight.”

Ashley sank down on a makeshift bench of driftwood and stretched her legs out toward the fire.

Jason retrieved the wine and joined her. She pulled his jacket a little tighter around her. Expertly, he pulled the cork from the bottle and poured.

“Did you ever date a musician?”

Ashley sighed. “No. But I wanted to. Or an artist.”

He handed her a cup. “Why not an accountant or a podiatrist?”

“An accountant isn’t going to be so overwhelmed with passion for you that he has to capture your essence in a painting or a song.”

“‘Capture your essence?’ You’ve put a lot of thought into this.” Jason teased.

“It’s a girl thing. We are excellent at fantasy.”

The waiter’s chords slowly turned into a loose, acoustic version of “Louie Louie.”

Ashley hummed along. Others around them whispered quietly in cozy twosomes or laughed in cozy groups.

“Thank you for dinner, Jason.”

“My pleasure,” he glanced toward the sky again. “I know what I’m asking you to do isn’t easy.”

“Well, if it weren’t for you, I might not even know that I’m engaged to a liar and a cheater.”

“I don’t know if I should say ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘You’re welcome.’”

“Both seem appropriate.”

“It’s going to be OK, Ashley. I promise you.”

She nodded. It would be. Somehow.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Surrounded by the sounds of fire and waves. The wine slowly eased tension out of her body.

Ashley caught the first few chords of “Moon River.”

“I love this song. It always makes me think of Audrey Hepburn on the fire escape.”

“What was she doing on the fire escape?”

“You’ve never seen *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*?” Aghast, Ashley clapped her hands to her heart. “You poor, deprived man.”

“How about a dance with a poor, deprived man?” He stood, gracefully, and held out a hand to her.

Ashley glanced around. What the hell? When else was she going to get the chance to dance to “Moon River” barefoot on a beach with a man as intoxicating as Jason? She put her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet.

His arm slid around her waist pulling her close. Ashley let herself melt against him. Solid, warm, strong. Jason's hand splayed across her back, not allowing an inch of freedom between their bodies.

Somewhere down the beach a fireworks show was starting. Ashley saw an orange starburst join the stars in the sky before shimmering back down to earth.

"This is our second dance. Practically our second date," he said quietly as he tilted his head down toward hers. An invitation.

"What's your game?" she breathed, studying his eyes.

"Why does there have to be a game?"

"I can't read you. You're so ... reserved. I'm not used to having to guess how someone is feeling."

"There's no game." He stopped the gentle sway of their bodies, holding her solidly against him. "And this is what I'm feeling." He lowered his mouth in an aching slow pursuit.

Ashley had time to stop him. To play it safe. But she wanted to know what it would feel like. Just once. To be the object of his desire. To have this first kiss.

Her eyes fluttered shut and she drew in his breath as his lips met hers. Jason closed his hand around her neck, his thumb forcing her chin up higher, and he deepened the kiss on her sigh.

His tongue met hers in a silky dance. A breathy moan escaped her throat, catching them both by surprise. Jason's hand tightened on her neck and his tongue drove into her mouth. This time it wasn't a dance. It was possession.

Ashley could do nothing but open for him and hold on to his shirt for dear life. He drew back a fraction of an inch, dragging his teeth over her lower lip on a low growl. Her knees buckled a half second before the boom of the fireworks echoed off the beach.

He steadied her, dropping his forehead to hers. Ashley was relieved to find his breathing as shallow as her own. Slowly, she loosened her grip on his shirt and smoothed the wrinkles. Afraid to make eye contact. What would she see? Her own desire mirrored, or something more ... calculating? He was like an enemy, testing her weak spots until there was no defense left.

In her heart, she knew she couldn't hold her own. He wasn't safe. He wasn't malleable. She could lose herself to those green eyes.

This pursuit, however thrilling, could destroy her.

“Wow,” she whispered, and stepped back to put a little space between them.

“Yeah.” Jason ran a hand through his hair. “Wow.”

They sat down in silence.

Jason was the first to break. “That was ... unexpected.”

Ashley nodded in agreement. “That’s a good word for it.”

“You know there’s no turning back now. You can’t expect to feel that and then pretend it never happened.”

Ashley picked up her wine. “Please don’t try to rationalize anything when my brain is mush.”

“Rationalize this. I want you. I want to kiss you like that again. I want to peel your clothes off layer by layer until you are completely naked. And then I want to touch every inch of you.”

“Jason —”

“I want to be inside you and feel you —”

Ashley slapped a hand over his mouth. “For the love of God, please don’t finish that sentence.”

He dragged her hand down. “I can’t make my intentions any clearer than that.”

“I’m confused. Do you want me to spy on my fiancé or get naked with you?”

“Both. I thought that was obvious.”

“I just don’t see how those two relationships can co-exist.”

“Ashley, you can have anything you want in this life.”

“I’m pretty sure I can have anything just not *everything*.”

“Let’s find out.”

He cupped her face and leaned in again. This time soft, sweet. His mouth gently explored hers while his thumbs brushed her jawline.

She opened for him just as she knew she would. It was inevitable.

When his tongue brushed hers, Ashley felt herself sigh.

The crackle of the fire and his touch warmed her skin.

This was what she craved. Connection. Heat. Lust.

“Jason.” She whispered his name against his mouth. “I need to think. About this.”

“About us,” he clarified.

She nodded. “About us.”

“Don’t think too long.”

“How can you be so sure about this?”

“I know what I want.” Jason shifted and drew her into his side. “And what I want is you.”

“But for what? Besides sex. Unless it’s just sex.”

“I think sex is a fine place to start,” he said, rubbing her arm through the jacket. “But it’s not the only thing I have in mind.”

“A relationship?” Her eyebrows skyrocketed.

“You look surprised, and not very pleased. Who would have thought just sex would be the less offensive an idea?”

“I’m not offended, just ... skeptical.”

“Let me make this as clear as possible so you don’t have to overanalyze anything. I like you. I want you. And I don’t share.”

Share? Ashley took a moment to picture him sleeping with her on a Tuesday and then someone else — probably an incredibly tall, stacked exotic beauty with a PhD — on a Wednesday.

“Fair enough. I still need some time to think. Sex and relationships are two things I don’t jump into.”

“I’m feeling generous. Take a minute to think about how good it will feel when I slide my hands down —”

Ashley covered his mouth again. “Believe me when I say I’ll be thinking of little else. Now shut up.”

His eyes glinted and she felt his lips curve against her palm. He kissed her hand before taking it in his. “I really do like you.”

“I kind of like you, too, Jason. Even though I’ll probably live to regret it.”

They stayed for a while longer, talking quietly and listening to the music and when it was time to go Ashley palmed the cork and slid it into her bag. No matter what happened, tonight was worth remembering.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ashley stayed in bed until Steven left Monday morning as much to avoid talking to him as to cling to the sweet dreams she'd had through night. She may be a woman scorned, but she was also a woman desired.

And that did something to keep her from being eaten alive by anger. Vengeance also helped.

In the bathroom, she spotted Steven's new watch under a hand towel. She picked it up to admire the face again. Only Steven would leave a \$10,000 watch carelessly shoved under a wet towel.

Her fingers skimmed across something on the back. She flipped the watch over and spotted the engraving. It was just a single initial in a stylized script. V.

It was time to start digging.

First things first. Ashley poured herself a giant mug of coffee and surveyed her living space from the kitchen.

Steven's "office" was set up in the corner, a disorganized mess of wires, electronics, and dirty dishes. When Ashley had first moved in with him, she fell for the "too busy to clean up" excuse for the first month before she realized he was just a slob. A dirty, teenage boy of a slob.

She would start there in the midst of the mess. She gave herself three hours to snoop before getting ready for the closing shift at work.

There was a TV and gaming console crowding a smoked glass stand. A cursory glance told her there was likely nothing but games and movies on the shelves beneath. Steven had a desktop computer tucked into the corner on a desk littered with papers and takeout containers.

Ashley restrained herself from tossing a week-old Chinese box into the trash and sank down in the desk chair. She didn't want to make it look like she had been snooping, but she was going to have to go through everything piece by piece and put everything back in its chaotic place.

She grabbed her phone and snapped a picture of the desk from multiple angles. Satisfied that she would be able to put everything back in

approximately the right place, she dug in. Takeout containers were moved to a stack on the floor. Junk mail went in another. Papers that could be interesting went into a third.

She paused every few minutes to snap a picture of the newest layer of debris.

From what she could tell there wasn't anything of investigative value besides a few alarmingly high credit card balances — thank God she wasn't marrying *that* — and a paper copy of his college fraternity newsletter upon which he had sketched Hitler mustaches and penises on the alumni pictures.

Finally reaching the top of the desk, Ashley slowly rebuilt her piles.

She wasn't even sure what, if anything, she would find. She kicked back in the chair and savored the last sip of coffee. How dumb was he?

Extremely. Life-threateningly.

The memory of “helping him” through their bio course in college came to mind. “Babe, just let me sit next to you during the test. You know I don't do well with exams. Oh, hey, can you write up this lab for me, too?”

She snorted to no one. “Victoria has no idea what she's getting.”

Ashley knew better than anyone how good Steven looked on paper versus in reality.

She shook it off. It was better to find this out now than to be a complete idiot herself and marry the asshole.

Her eyes landed on the desktop monitor. “Check his computer for emails, browsing history, anything you can think of,” Jason had told her.

She jiggled the mouse and the screensaver of the new Jaguar model dissipated into a password screen.

She held her breath. He had had the same password since college and used it for everything, but wouldn't he be more careful now that he was up to something?

Password123.

Nope. Not more careful at all.

Access granted, Ashley surveyed the desktop icons. Nothing was labeled Corporate Secrets or Insider Trading or Having an Affair.

She took the tiny flash-drive-looking device that Jason had given her and plugged it in. It was only a slight circumvent of the law. The deal was she would do a cursory scan while imaging the hard drive. Jason would run a deeper search on it and point her in the direction of any suspicious files or emails so she could “discover” them herself.

There were hundreds of messages that dated back three years. Apparently Steven had never thought to clean out his inbox. Ashley rolled her shoulders and dug in. There were messages from his football fantasy league from two years ago, dozens and dozens of Amazon order confirmations, and too many email chains from his fraternity brothers to count.

She decided to focus on messages from the past six months first, and if she came up empty, she would tackle older ones. Wishing she could organize as she went, Ashley settled for opening the preview pane and skimming.

After half an hour of fruitless skimming, she finally stumbled across an email that stood out. It was from February.

To: steve.noll@emax.net

From: pbardman@corelink.com

Great running into you Friday. It's always awesome to see a brother in our natural habitat (bar). Let me know if you want to hang out. It'll be like old times. Well, if they let junior CPAs leave the office during tax season. And as if tax season isn't bad enough, now we've got this extra work piled on for the next few months. Things were a lot easier when we were in school and pledges to do all the work.

Phil Barden

Phil Barden was one of Steven's fraternity brothers. He graduated two years ahead of Steven and Ashley only knew Phil from when he returned to campus for Homecoming and Alumni Weekends.

She frowned. If Steven had run into Phil, he hadn't mentioned it to her and that in itself was strange. She grabbed her phone and opened Facebook. The Alpha Gamma brothers of Chapter Theta were diligent about updating their Facebook page with "small world" photos of their run-ins with other alumni.

She scrolled back through the page's posts to February but didn't find a picture or a post of Steven or Phil.

Interesting. It was possible — in fact the odds were highly in favor — that Steven just forgot to mention the run in to her. Or that he was too drunk to remember even running into Phil. But something felt weird to her.

She clicked on Phil's Facebook profile. It was set to private so she only saw a few pictures of him at the beach and a football game. She switched back to Steven's computer and brought up LinkedIn.

Philip Barden was a junior accountant at a big accounting firm downtown where he had been for the past four years. Not much suspicious about being

an accountant, Ashley mused. From what she remembered, Phil was a pretty benign guy. He didn't seem like the type to get embroiled in legal scandals.

But then again, was she really any kind of judge of character?

She leaned back in the chair, jiggling her leg. What was she missing?

Her phone signaled a new email. It was from Jason.

Good morning, beautiful,

Attached is a copy of S's work calendar for the past few months. I highlighted all of the "meetings" he had scheduled with V in case that helps.

Jason

P.S. I'm still thinking about you. And last night.

She let herself bask in the warm glow of that last sentence for a minute. She had stayed up half the night remembering the feel of his arms around her, his mouth on hers. It felt like a dream.

Unfortunately, like all dreams, she had to wake up sometime. And when she did, it was next to a snoring Steven.

Ashley opened the file on her phone and scrolled through it. The highlights started in February and became more frequent before ending abruptly in April. She scrolled back again. The first "Lunch with V" was on February 16. The day after he ran into Phil.

Coincidence? What could Victoria and Phil possibly have in common?

Ashley crinkled her nose. She was getting nowhere. She made note of the email and its date before returning to the inbox and scanning through the rest of the messages in the time frame.

Nothing else stood out.

She moved on to Steven's Facebook account. *Password123*.

His newsfeed and posts on his wall were made up of mostly college friends. No surprises there. She located Phil Barden as one of Steven's friends and reviewed their interactions. Nothing suspicious there. Photo likes, random comments. But nothing suspicious.

Ashley opened his messages. Jackpot. Steven obviously never thought that anyone would poke through his stuff. There were dozens of messages to and from Victoria dating back to February.

She started skimming. And getting angrier.

If there had been any doubts about Steven's relationship with Victoria, the messages cleared those right up. It was also obvious who was in charge. Victoria set the times and places to meet, she instructed him on work issues, and she picked out his clothing.

“Wear the red tie tomorrow. I like how it looks with your navy jacket.”

The messages that really got Ashley’s blood boiling were the ones that mentioned her.

“It’s sad that she thinks her little job could ever be as important as your career.”

“How did you ever let her leave the house like that? I couldn’t look at her without laughing at that ridiculous outfit. Pathetic. You know I’d never embarrass you like that in public.”

And of course, Steven’s compassionate response.

“When you have the deal locked down, I’m all yours. I’m looking forward to starting a new job and a new life. With you!”

He was using Ashley as a pawn in a power play with his new girlfriend. The man was a pig. They were both disgusting and deserved everything they got.

Ashley checked the time. She had a few more minutes before she needed to get ready. She decided to take a cursory look at Steven’s browser history.

She had no idea there were that many porn sites on the Internet. And her fiancé had visited every single one of them.

Scrolling through the history, she saw a Facebook address that stood out from the xxx’s. Steven had visited it repeatedly and even bookmarked it.

She clicked the link and, recognizing the picture in an instant, felt her stomach drop. Georgie looking tan and happy on a beach in Cabo in large sunglasses and a very small bikini.

That jackass was jerking off to her best friend.

That little discovery was enough to put Ashley over the edge. She carefully put everything back in its place and deleted the browser history from her session. All the while debating throwing up or setting fire to everything Steven owned.

She decided not to share that little piece of information with anyone, including Georgie. No need to nauseate anyone else with Steven’s creeper habits.

It was time to go to her happy place and pretend that nothing else existed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ashley parked in the garage two blocks over and attempted to use the walk to mediate her way out of the funk. It didn't work.

When she arrived at the store, she was still furious and had the beginnings of a pounding headache, which got worse when she noted two black SUVs parked out front. Both with understated Baine Security decals.

Ashley pushed her way through the door and nearly tripped over the leg of a ladder.

"Sorry about that," chirped the man — very young man, Ashley noticed — atop the ladder. He scampered down from his perch and extended his hand. Realizing he still held a screwdriver, he stuffed it in his pocket.

"You must be Ms. Sapienza. I'm Dax. Mr. Baine told me to give you a grand tour."

"Dax?" Was that short for something? "What does Mr. Baine want you to give me a grand tour of?"

"Your new security system," he waved his arm expansively around the store and Ashley noted several discreet surveillance cameras.

"Ashley! My dear!" A tall woman with dark curly hair made a bee-line for Ashley.

"Barbara! When did you get back?" Ashley threw her arms around the woman and squeezed. "I thought you weren't coming back until next week."

"We cut our trip short so John could make his 45th reunion this weekend. But enough about me. Isn't this wonderful?"

Ashley glanced around the store and spotted two other Baine employees tinkering with electronics and tablets.

"What is all this?"

"Your friend Mr. Baine contacted me. He said he knew the store's system needed an upgrade, which it desperately did, and that he had a new system that needed to be tested." Barbara clapped her hands together, sending a half dozen bangles jingling.

“Jason gave us a security system?” Ashley closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“He did!” Barbara clasped her hands together. “We’re paying a ridiculously nominal monthly monitoring fee, which he wasn’t going to charge us at all, but I insisted.”

The front door bell announced a new arrival. Barbara glanced past Ashley. “I’ll help these ladies, and Dax, you can give Ashley the grand tour. We’ll catch up later.” She winked and sailed off to greet the customers.

“Ms. Sapienza,” Dax approached. “If you have a moment, I’ll show you the system.”

Forty minutes later, Ashley escaped down the back hallway. She was just going to take a few deep breaths and try not to murder anyone. The only ones within murdering distance were just collateral anyway.

First, peeling back the layers of Steven’s deception and disgustingness, making her feel like the biggest idiot in the world. And now, Jason sweeping in and invading her workplace. Damn it. Dwell was her sanctuary. She didn’t need interference here. What the hell was he thinking?

She shoved the back door open, startling a sleek blonde in a fitted gray suit.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t realize anyone was out here.” Ashley stepped out into the sunshine.

The woman lifted her gaze from the tablet in her hands. “Do me a favor,” she said in a clipped British accent. “Stand here and let me see if this works.”

“I take it you’re with Baine, too.”

“Of course,” she said, frowning at the screen. “OK, now lift your face.”

Ashley raised her chin. “Um, exactly what are you testing?”

“Mmm-hmm, now turn around and face the door,” she said, gesturing without looking up from the screen. “OK, look down and slowly turn around.”

Ashley complied, feeling like a dancing monkey. “Stop. Keep your face down. OK, that’s good.” She nodded, still frowning, and made a few more swipes across the screen. “Excellent.”

She tucked the tablet under her arm and extended her hand. “Patricia.”

“Ashley.” They shook.

“Right then, Ms. Sapienza. I’m sure Dax has given you an overview of the system. So let me just show you how this particular piece of it works.”

She turned the tablet toward Ashley. “Here you’ll see a video feed of the back door. It’s a relatively wide angle. When there is movement detected, the system automatically begins recording until the movement ceases.”

Ashley nodded in feigned interest. She was still preoccupied with her roiling anger.

“Now, this is a new feature that’s still in development, but Mr. Baine thought this would be the right system to test it on.” Patricia selected a video on the screen and pushed play.

Ashley watched as camera footage of the back door of the store rolled. She spotted Patricia alone, huddled over the tablet just before the door burst open and she stepped out.

The camera immediately zoomed in and locked on her face.

“Wow.”

“Indeed,” Patricia nodded. “This is the beginning of a line of facial recognition projects that my department has been working on. The cameras lock on to the face and try to capture it from as many different angles as possible. It’s going to make recognizing individuals from security footage much more efficient.”

“That’s impressive.”

Patricia nodded briskly. “Mr. Baine seems pleased with the project.”

“Right. Mr. Baine.” Ashley didn’t care how pleased Mr. Baine was with anything. She was going to have a loud chat with him about boundaries. “Well, thank you Patricia. If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go talk to Mr. Baine.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Barbara had no problem letting Ashley leave to “discuss the system” with Jason. “Please tell him thank you from all of us,” she reminded her on her way out the door.

“Why isn’t anyone else upset by this?” Ashley muttered to herself as she pulled out of the garage. It felt like a ... debt. Who would give so generously without expecting something in return?

Jason’s office building wasn’t hard to find. It jutted into the downtown skyline in sleek sharp lines. The heavy glass doors opened to a marble-floored lobby and a bank of elevators just beyond a security desk. She paused long enough to watch the tide of people entering and exiting with swipe cards.

Swipe-card-less, Ashley opted for the security desk. “Excuse me, I need to go to Baine Security.”

“Of course, ma’am,” the desk attendant said politely. “May I see your ID please?”

Ashley passed him her driver’s license and held her breath. She wasn’t going to be on any list. She should probably just text Jason, ask him to come down, and then causing a scene in the lobby.

“Ms. Sapienza, you are cleared to visit Baine Securities. Mr. Baine left you a passcard, which is yours to keep so you can come and go as you please.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting to be on the list. I didn’t tell Mr. Baine I was coming.”

The guard chuckled. “If you’re trying to surprise him, don’t bother. Nothing gets past him.”

So he was expecting her. He was expecting her before she even decided. For some reason that pissed her off even more. Ashley strode toward the elevators, ready for battle.

The doors opened and she found herself face to face with him. All six feet three inches of perfection. And he absolutely did not look surprised.

Jason reached for her hand, which rose automatically to meet his even as she shook her head.

“Ashley. I’m glad to see you. Come upstairs.” He pulled her back into the elevator with him while she continued to shake her head.

A crush of people joined them in the elevator, nearly all of them nodding at or greeting Jason by name. He returned their greetings, using their names, because, of course, Jason *would* know everyone. He still maintained a tight grip on her hand.

“How did you know I’d be here?” she said, keeping her voice low as the elevator rose.

Jason shrugged and kept his gaze forward.

Ashley let the adrenaline carry her up the 20 floors to where Baine Security occupied the building’s top two floors. When the doors opened, Jason pulled her toward the front desk.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Baine,” chirped the young man behind the desk of Bain Security.

“Will.” Jason nodded in greeting, and without pausing hauled Ashley down the hallway.

She had a feeling the front desk guy was dialing everyone in the office about seeing Mr. Baine drag a woman around the office. Unless it was a daily occurrence.

Jason stopped abruptly, and Ashley smacked face first into his very solid back. He pulled her around to his side. “Ashley, this is Mona. Mona, this is Ashley. Ashley is the reason you are so happy with your birthday gift.”

Ashley smiled reflexively at the woman behind the huge desk that guarded a pair of frosted glass doors. Her silver streaked hair was pulled back in a severe bun. Her jacket fit her slim shoulders in a precise way that hinted at custom tailoring. Her face gave nothing of her age away. Sharp blue eyes measured Ashley behind stylish glasses.

The glass vase filled with a spray of pink calla lilies dominated the front corner of her desk. Lorenzo had outdone himself, Ashley noted.

“So you’re the one who deserves the credit,” she rose from her chair and eyed Ashley.

Ashley had the fleeting feeling that she was a noisy student come face-to-face with the librarian.

“Thank you for the lovely gift,” Mona said, her face softening into a motherly smile, and Ashley felt herself relax.

“You’re so welcome. Jason knows you very well and gave me good information to make suggestions on. He’s obviously cares about you very much.”

“I told you you’d like her.” Jason winked at Mona and pulled Ashley toward the doors behind her.

“Wait a minute, Jason. Before you drag Ms. Sapienza into your lair, don’t forget your three o’clock and I have the forms from the lawyers for your meeting tomorrow morning. So don’t leave the office without them.”

Why did everyone call her “Ms. Sapienza” here? Was there a memo? Ashley also thought it was interesting that Mona was the only person in the building who called Jason, “Jason.”

He frowned and glanced at his watch. “That’s fine. Have the papers sent down to my car.”

“It was nice to meet you, Ms. Sapienza.”

Jason pulled Ashley with him through the glass doors.

“It was nice to meet you, Mona. I’m glad you like the vase —”

Her reply was cut off by the closing doors.

She whirled on Jason. “That was rude! And speaking of, what’s with you invading my store with a security system that I didn’t ask —”

His mouth was on hers, cutting off her tirade and train of thought. Jason cupped her face and moved his lips over hers in an urgent assault.

She melted into him, hands gripping the lapels of his jacket. His hands dropped to her hips, pulling her tighter against him. “I’ve been thinking about doing this since last night,” he said between kisses.

Ashley grabbed on to what was left of her common sense and pushed him back a pace.

“Why did you give us a security system?” She couldn’t cover the breathlessness in her voice, but she did manage a glare.

“Isn’t that like asking why did you throw the life preserver overboard to the drowning sailor?”

“No. It’s like asking why you installed a security system worth tens of thousands of dollars in a little retail shop without asking for anything in return.”

“You’re angry.”

“Of course I’m angry!” Ashley spun around to pace the expansive office. “You went to my boss, behind my back. You invaded the store with your team of tech nerds. And you didn’t even say a word to me about it.” She

ticked the items off on her fingers. “Not to mention that isn’t some run-of-the-mill home security system. I can’t even imagine what it costs.”

Jason frowned thoughtfully. “So, you’re upset because I went to a business owner with a mutually beneficial proposal that would keep you and your co-workers safer while working. And then had the audacity to have my team of professionals install a very adequate security system. All without consulting the business’s manager, who also happens to be the woman I want to sleep with.”

Ashley sputtered. Verbal arguments were not her strong suite. She always lost herself to the mad and then spent the next several hours coming up with brilliant comebacks in the mirror.

She could feel herself losing ground. “You should have asked me.”

“You would have said no.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you would feel like it’s too expensive of a gift and too much of an interference with your job, which is quite possibly the only place you feel in control. Also, you probably don’t want to face speculation about what the ‘hot security expert’ is doing lurking around you and your store.”

Ashley bit her lip. Yep. That was pretty much her argument.

“So you knew I’d say no and why I’d say no and yet you did it anyway?”

“You’re working in an environment that does little, if anything, to mitigate threats.” His tone was clipped now.

She opened her mouth to interject, but he continued on.

“Your store’s system was lacking, which, in this city isn’t just careless, it’s dangerous. I happen to have the resources to correct that. Everyone wins.”

“It’s invasive. It’s ... And why the hell are you so concerned over the store’s safety?”

“*Your* safety,” he corrected, temper beginning to show. “I want you safe.” He crossed to her.

“What about people speculating about us?”

“Let them.” Jason pulled her into his arms. “I want you. And I want you to be safe.” Ashley felt her resistance waiver. She couldn’t think with him so close, his hands on her.

“Damn it, Jason. I’m not done being angry.”

They grappled in the embrace. Anger warred with lust. Ashley felt him hard against her belly and she couldn’t stop herself from pressing against

him. Jason's hands coursed down her back crushing her to him. His hands slid lower still over her behind and down to the hem of her skirt. With skill, he slid his hands under her skirt and back up, bunching the material around her waist and leaving her legs bare.

Their mouths warred, straining for more. His hands returned to her behind, squeezing; he lifted her against him. Ashley wrapped her legs around his waist and settled against his erection.

Her lacy thong provided no protection.

Jason carried her over to a long, low sofa and collapsed on top of her. He settled between her legs, pressing on the very center of her heat. The only noise was their heavy breath and the occasional whimper or growl. He yanked open her blouse with force and filled his hands with her breasts. Too much of a distraction, the soft cups of her bra were shoved down to bare her curves to him.

Ashley reached down to cup him through his pants. He groaned and she squeezed harder.

"I want you," he growled low as his mouth settled over her nipple. There were no gentle tastes. He latched on and began to suck. Ashley arched against him, offering him everything.

She couldn't think. She needed to be closer. She needed to feel his skin against hers. She needed him to drive inside her and make her forget everything.

His mouth moved to her other breast while his fingers found her nipple still damp from his mouth. His fingers tugged and rolled even as he took the other aching tip between his lips.

"Jason, please! I need you."

"Say my name again. Tell me you want me."

He tugged her hand free from between them and pressed against her center, ignoring the layers of clothing in the way.

"Jason, I want you," Ashley whispered on a moan. "I want to be with you."

He released her breast long enough to recapture her mouth. His tongue thrust into her mouth in a savage imitation of sex.

He thrust against her again and Ashley felt her sex tighten from the friction.

Jason took her pebbled nipple between his fingers, squeezing and tugging. He replaced his fingers with his mouth, sucking the taut peak until it

strained against his tongue. His hand slid down her body, over her skirt, to her bare thigh.

Ashley reflexively opened her thighs wider.

Jason rose up on his knees and slid his fingers between her legs, up to the silky barrier.

Ashley bucked against his fingers. She needed him closer. Inside.

Two fingers slid under the thin barrier to touch her.

“God, Ashley.”

“Jason, I want —”

Twin alerts from his desktop and phone broke through the trance.

“Your 3 o’clock is here,” said Mona through the intercom.

Ashley shoved at Jason and squirmed off the couch, smoothing her skirt down.

“Goddamnit, Ashley.” He attacked his tie, which was wildly askew.

“This is *my* fault?” Temper threatened to snap again as her fingers stumbled over the buttons on her blouse.

Jason gave up on the tie, grabbing her wrist instead. “You make me forget everything.” He planted a hard kiss on her mouth and seemed ready to move in for more.

Ashley put a hand to his mouth. “You’re forgetting again.”

She watched the glints of gray and brown in his eyes sharpen. Jason kissed her hand before releasing her.

She made him forget. With a man as in control as Jason Baine, that was a feat. She reached up and straightened his tie. “To be continued?”

“To be continued,” he agreed. “Soon.” It was a promise. Or a threat.

Jason took his time smoothing her skirt down over her hips and straightening her blouse. “I think I lost one of your buttons.” He grinned, looking not at all apologetic.

Ashley held the gapped fabric together. “Good thing I have a sweater in the car.”

She looked up and caught his smug grin. “Don’t think that this gets you out of explaining exactly how installing a ridiculously expensive security system in my place of business is not an inappropriate invasion of privacy.”

“I want you safe at all times.” He said it matter-of-factly, and it sent her heart skipping. Romance and logic did battle. He cared. A lot. Enough to want to keep her safe. But it was the kind of over-the-top gesture that made her feel uncomfortable, indebted.

“How did you get this past Barbara?”

“Barbara isn’t nearly as cynical and suspicious as you are. It was a simple transaction. She needed an upgrade to her system, and I happened to have one that was ready for testing before releasing it.”

“Jason there’s a fingerprint scanner.”

“I didn’t think you’d like the retinal scanner. Did Dax show you how arm it from your phone?”

“I’m still not happy about this.”

“I know, and I’m grateful you’re willing to indulge me.”

“Thank you for your very generous, very unexpected gift,” she said primly.

“Are you talking about the system or what just happened on the couch?”

Ashley smacked his arm. “You are ridiculous.”

“Then you’ll humor me when I give you these.” He crossed to his desk and picked up a manila envelope.

Ashley peeked inside. “Parking passes?”

“For you and the rest of the girls at the shop. Now you can park on the street close to the store instead of walking to the garage at night.”

Ashley sighed heavily.

“Are you getting mad again?” He tipped her chin up.

She shook her head. “I think I’m maddened out. Now I’m just tired. And since we’re exchanging strange gifts, here’s yours.” She fished the flash drive out of her bag and handed it to him.

“I haven’t found anything incriminating yet, but we will. He’s not very bright.”

“Not if he let you go,” he said, kissing her hand again.

Jason wrapped an arm around her. “Come on, I’ll show you the back way out of here so you don’t have to meet seven Austrian businesspeople while looking like you were just mauled.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The next few days flew by leaving little time for spy games or obsessing over Jason, but Ashley managed to still do a bit of both. The forensic imaging of the hard drive would take some time, so she tried to carve out an opportunity every day to comb through Steven's Facebook account.

She was itching to take another pass at his computer at home, but hadn't found a safe opportunity to do so.

She was going to have to do something soon, though. After enduring a takeout night at home with him, which he tried to turn into sex, Ashley was pretty sure she wouldn't be able to keep it together for much longer. One of them would end up dead. Him from murder or her from an aneurysm.

She hadn't seen Jason since Monday and found her thoughts wrapped up in him more often than on Steven and the present situation. Ashley felt like a teenager with a huge crush on the high school quarterback.

She couldn't afford to lose her focus, she told herself. Once Steven was out of her life, then she could explore Jason. Every inch of him. And that meant she was going to have to stop avoiding Steven like the plague and start dragging information out of him.

The best way to do that was to cook a big meal and pump him full of alcohol.

Arriving home, she found Steven engrossed in a reality show. "Hey, babe," he called from the couch.

Ashley hefted the grocery bags onto the counter. "Hey." She spotted an empty glass on the coffee table in front of him. Perfect. He had already started.

She wandered over to the bar and poured a generous scotch for him and grabbed a bottle of wine for dinner. "I'm making spaghetti tonight."

"Awesome," he said, attention still on the screen.

Ashley put the drink down in front of him and took his empty glass to the kitchen where she started to unload the groceries.

Usually, when she made spaghetti, she used her grandmother's recipe for sauce. But she didn't want to taint a family tradition by making it for Steven, so she went for store-bought instead.

Ashley opened the wine and poured two glasses before sliding the garlic bread into the oven.

She added the pasta to the boiling water and turned the sauce down to a simmer. Cooking always relaxed her. But not tonight.

Ashley reached into the pocket in her bag to make sure the new gadget Jason had messengered to her today was still secure. This little drive was for Steven's cellphone. But the only time he didn't have it on him was when he was sleeping.

She was just supposed to plug it in and let it sync and it would somehow magically copy all of Steven's texts and browser history. Again, it was a slight circumvention of the law. But she was willing to bend the truth if it meant she could get her life back, Steven-free.

The timer on the oven buzzed as she drained the pasta. Ashley plated up the spaghetti and bread and carried it to the table.

"Dinner's ready."

She made a return trip to the kitchen for the bottle of wine.

It was time to work. Steven dug in and Ashley made sure to keep his wine topped off. "So how was work today?" She crunched into a piece of garlic bread.

"Same old," he said, reaching for his glass. "It's a joke. I put all this time and effort in, and the partners just reap the rewards. I get nothing out of it."

"Your last bonus was pretty decent," Ashley ventured.

"Chump change. Literally," he snorted. "It's almost embarrassing. You know what a junior partner takes home? It's like triple what my paycheck is. And *those* bonuses are something worth talking about."

"Why do you think they aren't making you partner track?" Ashley toyed with the noodles on her plate.

Steven wiped his mouth on his napkin and picked up his glass again. "Victoria says they're just trying to get everything they can out of me. Like I'm some kind of servant. They're doing the same thing to her."

She couldn't believe his nerve — or was that stupidity? — that had him so casually mentioning his mistress's name to her.

"She's family. Isn't she guaranteed to be partner?" Ashley couldn't quite bring herself to say Victoria's name.

“She thinks that’s why they’re so much harder on her. That’s why she wants to leave. So she can prove to her grandfather that she’s more valuable than he thinks she is.”

“Do you think it’s because she’s not actually family?” And just trying to take advantage of tenuous connections?

“They just feel threatened. But they’ll be sorry when we leave.”

Ashley poured more wine into his glass and figured what the hell before topping her own off.

“So Victoria’s leaving the company, too?” Ashley congratulated herself on not gagging on the woman’s name.

Steven nodded and reached for another piece of garlic bread. “Yeah, she’s the one who got the line on some partner-track jobs.”

Ashley kept her gaze on her plate. “What firm are you looking at?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. She said she has some details to work out first.” He wiped his mouth again and finished off the rest of the wine, kicking back in his chair. “Soon I’ll be calling the shots. That’s what I care about.”

###

She had thought about setting her alarm for the middle of the night but was afraid it would wake the soundly sleeping Steven next to her. She didn’t need the alarm anyway. Ashley hadn’t even closed her eyes since she climbed into bed hours earlier.

She was going to get some answers tonight and the thought of that was enough to keep her awake.

Ashley held her breath and tiptoed over to Steven’s nightstand. His breathing was deep and even and the occasional snore reassured her that he was out.

Very carefully, she lifted the phone from the table. She waited to hear another snore before unplugging the charger. Ashley hugged the phone to her chest to block the light of the screen and quietly left the room.

Keeping the lights off, she scurried across the loft to Steven’s workspace. While the drive read his phone, she thought she would give his email another look. She hadn’t snooped through his sent folder yet and wondered if there was something in there worth finding.

She eased into his desk chair, wincing at the telltale squeak. To her anxious ears it sounded as loud as a gunshot in the silent apartment. She

listened intently for a minute, straining for sounds of life coming from the bedroom.

Satisfied that Steven still slept, she plugged the tiny drive into the cellphone's port and pushed the sync button. A blinking green light appeared, showing the sync was in progress. Since Jason said it should take about 15 minutes she opened Steven's email on the computer to double down on the spying.

Something was still nagging her about his run in with Phil. She was curious to see if he had replied to Phil's message.

Ashley opened his sent folder and sorted it by recipient. Bingo. One reply to Philip Barden two days after the original message was received.

Ashley previewed the email.

To: pbardman@corelink.com

From: steve.noll@emax.net

Hey man,

Great to see you, too! We definitely need to get together more since we're both in the same city. So work is still shitty? It's funny that the legwork for billion dollar acquisitions is done by a guy who puked on the ping-pong table at Homecoming two years ago. Can't hang with the pledges, can't make the big bucks like the partners. It sucks being this age where we do all the work and have none of the fun. Want to get together next Thursday and trade work stories? You can let me know on my other email sgnoll@gmail.com.

He had another email account. Ashley snapped a picture of the screen with her phone. She wanted to document her discovery step-by-step to make sure she could tell Jason where to look. She switched back to the desktop and opened a browser window. Sure enough, in the history she found several visits to Gmail.

One thing at a time, she cautioned herself. She reorganized his sent message folder by date and closed out of the program. Returning to the login page, she paused.

Steven had gone to great lengths to create a new email account to hide something important, so wouldn't it follow that he would use a different password?

Password123.

Login error. Damn it!

Ashley leaned back in the chair and drummed her fingers quietly on the desk. What would it be? How many tries would she have before the account

locked?

She let her eyes scan the wreckage of his desk. Sticky notes, envelopes, and takeout menus. It could be written on any of them. Ashley sighed and closed her eyes. “Think like an asshole,” she whispered. “If I were a self-important, cheating asshole how hard would I work to hide something secret?”

Ashley opened her eyes and spotted the keyboard. She peered under it. There on the desk was a single yellow sticky note.

DoubleD123.

Double D. Obviously an homage to Victoria’s rack. Ashley mimed vomiting on the keyboard.

Theatrics aside, it was time to test her gamble.

Holding her breath, she typed it into the password field and hit enter. A full inbox opened on the screen.

Pay dirt! Dozens of messages to and from Victoria Van Camp and Phil Barden.

Ashley silently punched the air in victory. She had him now.

The drive on the phone signaled solid green. It was done, but Ashley was just getting started.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ashley huddled over her latte in the corner of the café praying that the caffeine would help her through the day. It was 6:30 a.m., and she had been up the entire night combing through Steven's secret email account.

The cozy coffee shop was a few blocks out of the way from home and work, so she rarely visited, but it suited her needs today.

She spotted him before he saw her. Even dressed for a workout, Jason moved with a casual authority. Ashley had the pleasure of watching his face go from searching for her to finding her. It lit up.

It was going to be a good day.

Jason threaded his way through the collection of tiny tables.

"Thanks for meeting me. I like the shorts. They're a nice change from suits," she wiggled her eyebrows.

Jason glanced down at his gym shorts and long-sleeve t-shirt. "This is how I usually dress for a pre-dawn rendezvous."

He sat down, and Ashley slid a black coffee across the table to him. "You don't look like the cream and sugar type."

"Very astute of you, investigator."

Ashley grinned. "Hold your applause until the end, please." She passed him the phone drive and a manila envelope. "I've got something good."

He smiled an easy smile, but she saw the sharpening in his eyes. "How good?"

"I know what they're after, who gave them the info, and what they plan to do with it."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, I'm kind of amazing." She leaned in and tapped the folder. "So here's the overview. One of Steven's college friends is a junior accountant at a firm downtown. He is doing grunt work to help one of the firm's clients structure an acquisition. A billion-dollar tech startup. The deal is top secret and going down at the end of next month. He runs into Steven, makes a casual comment about the deal without naming names, Steven mentions it to

Victoria, and Victoria latches on. ‘Get the details, find out who it is, I can use this as leverage for partnerships...’ She’s working on selling the info to a guy — don’t have his name — at a rival firm in return for cushy jobs for her and Steven.”

Ashley leaned back in her seat, cheeks flushed with excitement. “Go ahead and read. I went to the store at 4 this morning to print copies. Almost set off that damn alarm, too, until I remembered Dax’s instructions for disarming it on my phone.”

Jason stared at her for a minute, taking it in.

“What? I’ve had a lot of coffee,” she shrugged in apology.

“You’re pretty cute when you’re over-caffeinated.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Just read and tell me how brilliant I am.” She settled in and watched him. The frown line between his eyebrows deepened. He skimmed methodically, without an outward reaction. But when he put the papers down and looked at her, Ashley could see the energy.

“You are incredible, Ashley.” His voice was calm, but she heard the edge of victory. “We’re going to get them.”

She grinned back at him, basking in the moment. The end was near, and so was a new beginning.

“I kind of just want to rip your clothes off right now,” he said huskily.

“You’re going to have to hold that thought until next week, Romeo. I’m leaving for my parents’ in a few hours. Anniversary weekend. I need to get out of my life for a few days.”

“Monday then,” he winked. “Do you mind if I make a few calls? I’ll take you for breakfast afterward if you promise not to drink any more coffee.”

“Perfect.”

Jason took the folder with him and went outside to make his calls. Ashley busied herself by checking her email on her phone. She hadn’t checked it in two days, which was unheard of for her.

She spotted one from her mother from the day before. Subject: Change of plans!

When Jason returned, he found Ashley slouched in her chair, staring pensively at her phone. “What’s the matter, beautiful? Run out of caffeine?”

Ashley sighed. “No. Worse. My parents canceled. Dad surprised Mom with a cruise.”

“That’s terrible,” he said, straight-faced. “What a bastard.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Terrible is me spending the weekend with Steven who already has plans to spend it with his mistress.”

“He’s planning on you being gone the whole weekend?”

Ashley nodded mournfully. “I was supposed to leave in two hours. I wasn’t coming back until Sunday night.”

Jason leaned forward and covered her hands with his. “How would you like to still leave in two hours?”

She perked up, but stayed suspicious. “Where am I going?”

“Do you own any flannel?”

###

Ashley shifted in the vinyl seat of the Jeep and watched greenery sweep past her window. Jason was driving while directing what sounded like a conference call. It was his third call of the drive so far. But she didn’t mind. It gave her time to think.

There was no doubt in her mind what this trip to Jason’s cabin was going to end in.

Sex. Of the mind-blowing, reality-altering kind. Her pulse quickened.

She stole a glance at him. Dressed in worn jeans and a faded t-shirt, he still looked hot, but a more approachable hot.

Ashley was glad she had taken the time to shower, shave, and repack the bag originally intended for the trip to her parents’.

Good-bye comfy shorts and tank top. Hello matching underwear and bras.

She rubbed her palms against her jeans. Was she ready to have his hands on her?

Jason hung up and tossed his phone into a cup holder near the floor.

“Sorry about that. Just trying to put things in motion so nothing stalls while we’re away.”

Ashley nodded. “Do you think we have enough for someone to start an investigation?”

“I think it’s enough for some healthy suspicion. My grandfather has an old friend in the SEC, and he’s going to start there.”

“So we have the weekend off?”

“The whole weekend. Did you have anything in mind?” His expression told her exactly what he had in mind. He winked.

“I thought we’d just play it by ear and see what comes up,” she said, innocently.

He rested a hand on her thigh and squeezed. “I have a feeling something will come up.”

###

The road to the cabin was more like a trail than a driveway. She enjoyed the winding path through the woods entering the full bloom of spring. They drove into a sunny clearing, and Ashley could only shake her head as Jason brought the Jeep to a stop in front of the sprawling log home.

“Welcome to the cabin.” Jason leaned over and released her seatbelt.

“This isn’t a cabin. It’s a log castle,” she corrected, looking out the window. Surrounded by trees the L-shaped home rose more than two and a half stories high. There were windows everywhere and a huge porch that wrapped around to the back of the house.

“Come on. We’ll unpack after the tour.” He squeezed her leg and slid out of the Jeep.

She joined him outside, admiring. The forest of trees reached up to the blue sky. Flowering bushes and unstructured evergreens ringed the house, and a wide flagstone path led to the porch.

Birds and squirrels chattered in the trees, but there wasn’t a hint of traffic or human noise.

“This is amazing. I feel like we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

Jason took her hand. “The closest neighbor is half a mile that way.” He pointed to the west. “In the winter, you can see their lights from down at the lake.”

He led the way onto the porch and fished keys out of his pocket. The heavy barn-style front doors quietly clicked open and Jason stepped aside.

Ashley stepped inside. “Holy crap, Jason.”

He joined her in the foyer, grinning at her reaction. “Yeah, it’s not bad.”

“Not bad?” Ashley snorted. The great room had cathedral ceilings spanned by massive rough-cut beams. Leather couches and chairs faced a two-story stone fireplace in the living area that was overlooked by a loft. The kitchen and dining area took up most of the space to the right.

Daylight poured through three sets of French doors on the back wall.

She trailed her fingers over the countertops. “Roughing it doesn’t usually involve granite and custom cabinetry.”

“Trade-offs. There’s granite, but no cable here.”

Ashley raised an eyebrow. “TV?”

“One big screen with an extensive Blu-Ray collection.”

“Internet?”

“WIFI, of course. Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

Ashley laughed and crossed to a set of French doors. She stepped out onto the deck and took in the view. Lake, mountain, and the forest in bloom. From the railing she felt as if she was staring into a painting.

The breeze toyed with her hair and she lifted her face to the sun.

“This is beautiful, Jason.”

“I’m glad you like it.” His voice sounded husky. “I like having you here.”

Ashley turned to face him. She could see need and desire in his face. She felt it, too.

He stepped into her, hands settling on her hips. Her pulse quickened and blood stirred. “I want you, Ashley. More than I can say.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ashley ran her hands up his arms to his chest. She felt the thud of his heart under her palm and was reassured that his was racing, too.

She brought her hands to his face. She answered him in the only way she knew how. Her lips brushed his lightly, gently at first. Ashley felt a tremor run through him. His fingers flexed against her hips. He took a deep breath and lowered to her.

Need stirred between them.

Ashley wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her fingers in his hair. Jason shifted to press against her as his tongue swept inside her mouth. She felt him hard against her, with the railing biting into her back.

She rocked her hips against his and Jason spun her away from the railing without breaking contact with her mouth. She felt his fingers slip under her henley. They skimmed across her stomach before streaking up her sides. Like flashes of lightning, it burned her skin.

His hands stilled just under the silk of her bra. Ashley heard a soft moan and realized it came from her.

Jason skimmed his hands over her body and lifted her shirt. Careful not to touch her soft curves, he drew it up and over her head. He broke contact with her mouth to draw back and look at her.

Ashley missed the heat of his body as soon as he was gone.

His hands returned to her hips and met at the zipper of her jeans. With swift tug, he had them unbuttoned and was drawing down the zipper. Ashley could sense his impatience and knew he was trying to fight it.

He was trying to make it special for her. She smiled against his mouth.

“Jason, I need you,” she whispered.

“I’m here, baby.” The voice was rough, but the hands stayed gentle. “I want to see you.” He drew her jeans down her hips and sank down with them. On his knees, he steadied her so she could step out of them. He pressed his mouth to the navy silk of her underwear and Ashley gasped.

So close.

He rose up, lips leaving a trail of kisses, until he stood over her sighing against her mouth again.

“You’re perfect.” He whispered it.

Ashley dropped her head back and let him rain kisses down her jaw to her neck.

His hands slid down her body to cup her butt. Squeezing, he lifted her up against him. Ashley happily complied, wrapping her legs around his waist.

They were moving. Ashley felt the sunlight disappear from her skin, and a moment later felt cold granite beneath her. She rocked back on the kitchen counter, skimming hungry fingers down Jason’s chest to his abdomen. Lower still, she reached the waistband of his jeans.

He growled against her mouth, and she felt his stomach muscles quiver beneath her fingertips.

A shiver of power flowed through her. Her hands rushed to free him from the denim.

Ashley sighed against Jason’s mouth and trailed her fingers over the cotton of his boxer briefs.

He groaned and it was all the encouragement she needed to slip her hand behind the waistband and grip his straining erection.

“Wait.” His voice was a rasp.

But she ignored him. She stroked down his smooth, thick shaft and when her hand returned to the tip it was wet.

“Oh my God,” she whispered against his lips.

Impatient now, Jason tugged her underwear to the side and cupped her sex with his hand.

Her bra strap slid off her shoulder and the cup slipped lower on the curve of her breast. His fingers pressed against her wet center. “Show me,” he demanded.

Ashley yanked the other strap off her shoulder and shoved her bra down. Her nipples were already straining toward him.

“Look at me,” he whispered.

Ashley met his gaze and inhaled sharply as he drove two fingers inside her.

She gripped his erection tighter and began to stroke.

His fingers matched her pace and when his mouth finally found her breast, Ashley’s head fell back. She was completely at the mercy of the sensations coursing through her body.

His lips tugged at one nipple first and then the other. Jason's tongue worked its magic on the taut peaks, feeding.

She drew him to her and angled the tip of his shaft against her wet center. Each stroke of her hand slicked him against her in a heavenly torture.

Once. Twice. She matched the strokes with the tugs of his mouth. "Jason! I can't stop."

"Don't fight it, baby."

On the next thrust of his fingers she came, closing around him in warm waves of pleasure. She felt his heavy penis twitch in her hand.

She didn't even have a moment to float on the carnal decadence because he was lifting her again. He cradled her butt in his hands. The tip of his shaft pressed against her slick folds, teasing her every step. He took the stairs at an urgent pace and Ashley knew she had pushed him to the edge.

She squeezed him tighter with her legs. The need to be closer overwhelmed.

Jason shoved through a door, and she felt rather than saw the daylight that poured in through the wall of windows.

It warmed her skin like Jason's touch.

He dropped them both on the bed, and Ashley hiked her hips up against his. Apart by only millimeters of fabric, it still wasn't close enough.

She tugged at his shirt, and he accommodated, severing the connection with her mouth only long enough to pull the fabric over his head.

He sank down to her again, and Ashley relished the feel of his skin against hers. Fire to fire.

She ran her hands over his chest. Smooth, hot skin over carved muscle. She let her fingers trail lower over his stomach. Ashley wanted to stop and just look, to take him in, but couldn't stop kissing him.

He moved his lips over her, whispering dark promises that made her open for him, cuddle his hardness against her heat.

He pulled back, watching her face as he pressed into her.

Ashley gasped and let her knees fall open to the sides.

"I'm not going to be able to stop once I'm inside you." He leaned over her and kissed her gently.

She shivered at the promise.

His hips shifted back, away from her, and Ashley's fingers dug into the muscles of his arms demanding he stay. "Jason, please!"

He drove against her again, and Ashley locked her legs around his hips to keep him there.

“Greedy girl,” he warned.

She squeezed him tighter between her thighs.

Jason turned his attention to her breasts. He trailed his fingers across the upper curves of her breasts, following with his mouth. His lips burned a path that edged the delicate lace. “Lift up, love.”

Ashley did as he asked, rising to her elbows. He unhooked her bra with a deft flick and freed her.

Jason dipped his head to feed on her. She arched against him and rode the sensation.

This was what it felt like to be slowly consumed by hot licks of flames.

Impatience was building. Ashley used her heels to work at the waistband of his jeans.

Ever obliging, Jason stripped off his pants and underwear. With his erection finally free Ashley couldn’t stop the deep ache within her. Huge and hard, she wanted him to bury himself in her.

When Ashley made a move to wriggle out of underwear he stopped her.

“Let me.”

Ashley laid back and let him slide the silk down her legs. She opened wider for him. An invitation.

They studied each other for a moment, she on her back and he on his knees. His cock hung heavily barely an inch from her aching center. She took in the lines and plains of his muscled body.

“Is this really happening? Am I really here?”

He lowered to her, his mouth finding hers as the crest of his shaft probed intimately against her.

“Finally.”

Ashley wrapped her fingers around his cock. Desperate for the contact. He let her stroke and play. Ashley watched as he closed his eyes and tried to keep his breath under control.

She stroked harder. His breathing grew more ragged, his jaw clenched. He was beautiful, she thought. And he was hers even if it was just for today.

“God, Ashley.” His voice was ragged and his face was strained. It made her feel powerful, making his control slip millimeter by millimeter.

His hand closed around hers. “Stop.”

Pulling back, he shackled her wrists at her sides with his hands. “It’s my turn.” He lowered himself down between her thighs and placed a whisper-soft kiss there where the heat pooled.

Ashley’s head dropped onto the pillow as Jason tasted her very center. Already she felt it building. She was too close to the edge.

His fingers probed as his mouth worked against her. With the first thrust of his fingers she was lost.

“Jason! I can’t —”

“You will.” His voice was a rasp.

He ordered and her body complied. She couldn’t stop the first wave or the ones that crashed through her after it. She said his name on a gasp.

He growled and ranged himself over her. “Say it again.”

When she said his name again he drove into her, filling her, never breaking eye contact. She cried out, but kept her eyes locked on his. Full and aching, she took him in.

Finally.

They moved as one. Every breath, every sigh, every stroke, they climbed together toward the sun. She took him deeper and heard the growl from the back of his throat. His measured thrusts came harder and faster as the rhythm unraveled into a primal beat.

Her slick skin slapped against his.

Ashley felt the crest coming. Felt herself tighten around his shaft.

She bucked against him and shattered. Over the roaring in her head she heard him groan and felt the first jet of his release let loose deep inside her.

They grappled for each other in the crashing waves, coming together in the storm. She heard him whisper her name like a prayer.

###

Ashley was sprawled on the bed over Jason’s arm, facedown in beautiful oblivion. She felt like her body had just fulfilled its greatest purpose.

“Are you suffocating?” Jason rolled to her, running his free hand down her back to the curve of her butt.

“If I am, I’ll die happy.”

He gave her a gentle swat. “You can’t die. We’re not done yet.”

Ashley rolled over and swept the hair out of her face. “There can’t possibly be more than that.”

Jason dropped his mouth to her shoulder, kissing across her clavicle. His beard tickled her bare skin.

“There’s always more, love.”

And he proceeded to show her just how much more there was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hours later, Ashley woke to a reality better than dreams. She could feel Jason against her back. The sheet was pulled over them, and her feet were tucked neatly between his. The angle of the sunlight slanting through the windows told her evening was on its way. She rolled her head to the side and found Jason watching her.

Suddenly feeling vulnerable, Ashley swiped a hand over her mouth to make sure she hadn't been drooling. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Just a few minutes." His finger traced a trail across her chest just above the sheet. "How do you feel?"

Ashley gave herself a luxurious stretch. "Like I don't have bones anymore."

"Is that a good thing?"

She planted a kiss on his mouth. "A very good thing. This is an incredible room, by the way."

It was true. Though they had already spent several hours in the room, this was her first good look around. The bed was a huge expanse of luxurious fabrics cradled by dark, ornate wood.

The gable end of the room was a separate seating area set off by a wall of windows overlooking the forest and lake. A deep window seat with bookshelves beneath it tempted with the promise of a lazy afternoon reading with a water view.

"Do you happen to have a restroom in this hovel or is there a cozy outhouse in the woods?"

Jason pointed toward one of the doors on the wall opposite of the sitting area. "Through there."

When she slid off the bed, he caught her wrist, tugging her back for a kiss. "I'm glad you're here, Ashley."

"Me, too."

Still naked, she practically danced to the bathroom. And stopped in her tracks when her bare feet hit the warm slate floor. Of course his bathroom floor was heated, Ashley thought.

And the rest of the room was perfection, too. Dual vanities, topped in marble with glass tile backsplashes flanked the door. The shower was a tiled room with multiple heads and sprays that could easily hold eight adults. And then there was the tub. A sleek clawfoot centered in a large window overlooking nothing but forest. A fireplace was built into the wall at the foot of the tub with a candle-filled alcove filled above it.

She noted that none of the candles had been burned. Ashley wondered if Jason ever used the tub. Did he ever see the spectacular view anymore? Was it something someone could ever grow used to?

When she returned to the bedroom, she stood in the doorway and leaned against the frame.

“There’s only one thing that is going to make me leave this bathroom nirvana.”

Jason stirred on the bed and gave her a wicked grin.

“OK, two things.”

“Name it.”

“Food.”

“It looks like we were too busy for lunch today,” Jason said, checking the sun through the windows. “Steaks for dinner?”

Ashley dashed from doorway to bed and hopped on top of him. “You had me at steak.”

###

Of course there was an outdoor kitchen attached to the deck, what “cabin” wouldn’t have one? Ashley shook her head while she constructed the tossed salad and Jason was seasoning steaks on the counter next to the grill.

Hunger had her snatching carrots and cucumbers from the salad to tide her over. She ran the knife through a handful of radishes and relaxed in the moment.

Jason hadn’t wanted them to get dressed since they would just be taking their clothes off again and Ashley couldn’t argue with that practicality. So they decided on robes. He had magically produced a plush white robe in her size from the massive walk-in closet next to the bathroom.

Ashley wondered how many other women had wrapped themselves in that particular robe, but only for the briefest of seconds before dismissing the thought. She was here now, wasn't she? That's what mattered. She couldn't control the past or the future. But today was to be savored. Like this carrot. She crunched enthusiastically.

Jason glanced up from the grill. "Steaks will be done in 10."

"Salad's just waiting for dressing. I can go in and throw the potatoes in the microwave so they get done around the same time as the steaks."

"Perfect."

Yes, he certainly was. Even — or maybe especially — barefoot and robed, he still drew the eye. Now that she knew what was under the robe she wanted him even more. Ashley pressed a kiss to Jason's cheek as she passed him on her way to the kitchen.

He grabbed the belt of her robe, and she let him pull her closer. "I think we can do better than that," he teased.

Ashley wrapped her arms around his neck and rose on her tiptoes to press a soft kiss to his mouth. Jason lifted her off the ground and deepened the kiss before setting her down gently.

"That's better."

She smiled as she walked toward the door. A man who wanted to kiss her before she left the room. What would that life be like?

She had expected the relief of release. Not the growing intensity she felt. She was going to have to be much more careful when it came to guarding her heart. This kind of feeling couldn't possibly last.

In the kitchen, Ashley loaded two potatoes into the microwave. While they cooked she decided to check her phone. She had texted Steven hours ago with the lie that she had arrived at her parents' house.

She thought it best that she let him think there hadn't been a change of plans. It was ironic to think that she and her fiancé were both spending their weekend with their lovers.

Lover. What was Georgie going to say to that? Ashley laughed out loud at the thought of her friend's response. She would call her on Monday.

There was a text from Steven.

Tell them I said hi.

And a text from Barbara at the store instructing Ashley not to check her phone for the remainder of the weekend since she had been working so hard and everything at the store was completely under control.

You deserve a nice, quiet weekend!

Ashley wasn't sure if nice or quiet was the proper description for the toe-curling, angels-singing orgasms she had had so far. But Barbara probably didn't need to hear those kinds of details.

Thanks, Barbara! You're the best!

With things under control at the store, her parents out of the country, and Steven not expecting her back until Sunday night, she could afford to disconnect for a weekend.

The microwave timer beeped. Ashley put the steaming potatoes on a plate and returned to the deck where Jason was just pulling the steaks off of the grill.

"That smells amazing," Ashley groaned, sniffing the air.

"You'd better hurry. I could eat both of these after that workout," he warned.

"I will fight you for them. Don't get between my empty stomach and a plate of medium rare Delmonicos," she threatened.

They spent the rest of the evening eating, talking, and lounging. Jason put in a movie, and they missed the ending.

Ashley was beginning to wonder if proximity meant that they would always end up naked and sated.

Still straddling him, she pressed her lips to his neck. "I don't know why I can't keep my hands off of you."

"Let's hope that never changes." He stroked his hand down her bare back.

Ashley cuddled closer. "Ending up naked all the time really restricts the public activities we could do together."

"Mmm," Jason said as his fingers streaked up her spine, drawing goosebumps to the surface. "No grocery shopping. No movies. No restaurants."

Ashley laughed. "The people in the café would be scandalized."

"We could never have children. The parent-teacher meetings would get us arrested," Jason mused.

"I guess we're just going to have to learn to control ourselves," Ashley sighed.

"Let's not rush it." He tickled her ribs. "Maybe we can just become sex-obsessed hermits and never leave the house."

"My orgasm count says we're halfway there already," she teased.

He pinched her. "You're keeping track?"

“I like taking inventory, so I know exactly what I have.”

“Well, let’s see what we can do to get your numbers up.” He tossed her down on the couch cushion next to him and rolled to cover her.

###

Ashley snuggled deeper into the fleecy robe and wrapped her fingers around the cheery red coffee mug. She inhaled the scents of steamy caffeine and spring sunshine while enjoying the view from the deck.

It was perfect.

She felt relaxed, loose. At ease. Which was no slight feat, considering all that had happened recently. Her life was in shambles, but right this second it was all worth it.

If only she didn’t have to go back.

But of course she would. She would clean up the shards of the life that had been hers and move on. Ashley didn’t dare think of what the future would look like if Jason were in it. That was something she just wasn’t ready to consider.

Quiet weekends at the cabin. Long nights wrapped around each other, tasting, taking. Waking up to that perfect face every morning.

Ashley shook the thoughts from her head. Stop considering the un-considerable, she ordered. Underneath the perfection, Jason Baine was a man. A human one. And she knew so little about him. Could she ever settle again for a man who kept so much of his life from her?

“Good morning, beautiful.”

Ashley tilted her head back against the wood of the chair and smiled lazily. “Good morning, Romeo.”

Fresh from a shower, Jason leaned in for a soft kiss before helping himself to some of her coffee. His sweatpants sat low on his hips, drawstring untied, and his t-shirt looked like it had endured about a decade of wear.

He looked relaxed. Something Ashley hadn’t seen before.

“Two questions. How often do you work out, and how is it that my favorite creamer ended up in your refrigerator here?” she asked playfully.

“A couple of times a week and lucky guess?” He handed her the mug and leaned back against the railing.

“You would never leave anything up to luck. Do you have some kind of dossier on me?”

“A dossier?” He grinned.

“You know, a big, fat secret file with a list of my likes and dislikes.” Ashley stood, setting the coffee on the railing. She moved to stand between his legs and leaned into him. “Stuff like ‘loves hazelnut coffee creamer, dislikes lima beans and zombie movies.’”

“Likes riding me into oblivion?” Jason supplied, combing his fingers through her hair.

“That’s like saying ‘likes sunshine and puppies.’ Everyone would like that. And anyone who says they don’t shouldn’t be trusted.”

“In that case I love sunshine and puppies.”

“That’s very wise of you.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving. What time is it?”

“It’s 10:30. Do you want breakfast or lunch?”

“I’m hungry enough for both at this point,” Ashley said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Let’s go see what we can find in the kitchen before I ravage you again.”

“We’ve got to keep up our strength,” Ashley agreed solemnly.

They decided on sandwiches with bacon in a nod to breakfast and a tasty-looking pasta salad that Jason produced from the fridge.

“You certainly stocked up for this trip quickly,” Ashley teased.

“A motivated man always finds a way to get things done.”

“And what was your motivation?”

“Seeing you in nothing but that robe for 48 hours was quite the motivator.”

“Why Mr. Baine, flattery.” Ashley fluttered her eyelashes before turning her attention back to the cold cuts.

He laughed and heaped the pasta salad onto two plates. He looked almost human here. If humans had faces — not to mention bodies — that would make sculptors weep with joy at their perfection.

Ashley ran a knife through the thick, crusty sandwich bread and added them to the plates.

“Is this the only place you get to relax?” She handed him a plate and they walked through the doors to the deck.

“Sometimes. It’s usually more of a time issue than location.”

“I guess running the world is time consuming.” She eased down into a cushioned chair at the long wooden farm table.

“I’ve never had a reason to focus on anything but work before.”

Jason sat across from her, back to the view.

“You know you’re missing quite an impressive view,” Ashley said, stabbing at the pasta salad with a fork.

“You’re only saying that because you don’t know how impressive the view is from here.”

The blush tinged her cheeks as he watched her wolfishly. “Very smooth, Romeo.”

“Beautiful, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

“You know, you’ve already gotten me into bed ... several times. You have me here for the rest of the weekend. You don’t have to keep the pursuit at full speed.”

He leaned across the table and brushed his thumb against her lower lip. “I’m just getting started.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They decided to actually put on clothes and leave the house for a few hours so Jason could show her the lake. Ashley was glad she had gone with her instincts and packed sneakers and shorts. She also had a little black dress, bug spray, and a stain remover pen should the need for any of those items arise.

Ashley prided herself on being an organized planner. Things didn't usually surprise her because she explored all angles and developed contingencies before moving forward.

However, the fact that she was spending a sunny spring afternoon hiking with Jason Baine was a bit of a surprise.

She was an hour into a hike on a narrow pine-needle-strewn trail that meandered around the lake. Everything was green, even the light that filtered down through the canopy of leaves.

She threw a glance over her shoulder at Jason who walked quietly behind her, carrying a backpack with snacks and water.

"It's so peaceful here. Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he winked. "Take the next right at the Y."

She humored him and followed his directions. Of course there was a plan, a destination. Jason wouldn't do anything without an end goal in mind.

Another couple of steps, and the trees began to part.

The view stole her breath. She came to a halt on a large stone outcropping that overlooked the expanse of sparkling lake water below.

Jason rested his hands on her shoulders. "What do you think?"

"I think that there's no way this could possibly be real life."

He rested his chin on the top of her head and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Then we'd better enjoy it while we can." He dropped a kiss on her hair. "Come on, let's open the provisions."

They sat on the rock and stretched out. Ashley laughed when Jason unpacked the "provisions."

"Chips and a package of chocolate chip cookies?"

"It's the hiking snack of champions," he insisted.

“Champion teenagers maybe,” she teased, helping herself to a handful of salty chips and a bottle of water.

“Every man has his vices.”

“I would expect a man like you to have ... *different* vices.”

He handed her a cookie and took two for himself. “You’re talking about my dickie collection again aren’t you?”

Ashley nodded solemnly. “Yes, yes I am. You realize that as soon as I find it this torrid affair will be over.”

“I’ll burn them for you. Even the monogrammed ones.” He pivoted and laid his head down in her lap.

Ashley toyed with his hair. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do when this is all over?”

“When what is over?”

“What’s it going to do to your family when you have your stepsister arrested?”

“It’s going to make Thanksgiving dinner a lot more tolerable.”

Ashley pulled his hair. “I’m serious. What do your grandfather and father think about what’s happening?”

Jason sighed. “My grandfather worked very hard to make a place for Victoria, who never deserved one, in the family and his company. I think he was trying to make up for my father’s carelessness.

“He married Victoria’s mother, Sylvia, — presumably for her ex-husband’s money — and immediately began cheating on her. They were together for barely two years when he cheated on her with some widowed socialite with a coke problem. The divorce was messy. My grandfather put Victoria through college to make up for it. And then she guilt-tripped him into a job at the firm.”

“Who’s the bad guy in that story? Your father or Victoria?”

“Neither of them is an innocent victim.” He was staring off into space, a hard expression on his face. Ashley ran a finger over the line between his eyebrows to smooth it away.

His gaze returned to her and his face softened. “What are you going to do when Steven is out of the picture?” He tugged on a strand of her hair.

Ashley looked out over the vista. “I honestly don’t know. I ended up here because of Steven’s job, so without that restriction I could go anywhere. But I love the store. I love what I do there. And the city feels like home. So I don’t really see myself packing up and leaving town.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Jason took her palm and brought it to his mouth. “I’m also hoping you’ll be interested in seeing what we’re like without them.”

“Hmm. You mean, keep all this?” Ashley gestured at the view. “I don’t know. It would be such a hardship.”

Jason reached up to tickle her ribs. “Smart ass.”

Ashley laughed and wrestled his hands away.

“Tell me you’ll still be here after this is over.”

“It’s going to depend on how emotionally scarred I am,” she teased.

He moved so quickly, she didn’t have time to defend herself. Ashley found herself flat on her back with Jason straddling her. He pinned her arms over her head easily with one hand. His other hand roamed her side. “Tell me or I tickle.”

Ashley squirmed under him. “I’ll scream!”

He grinned and began his assault. Ashley did scream, but to no avail. Finally, gasping for breath, she gave him his answer.

“OK, OK, OK! I’ll be here!”

“Promise me.” He dug a finger into her belly.

“Promise!”

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” he leaned down and kissed her. It was intended to be light, playful. But the second Ashley’s tongue met his, the urgency exploded.

Jason’s hands streaked over her belly and under her shirt. In his haste to touch her, he yanked hard on her bra, rending it in two.

She gasped against his mouth as his hand found her breast.

The growl that came from his throat was primal. Ashley fought against the restraint at her hands, but he merely tightened his hold. “I want you here, like this.”

She could feel him hard against her.

“Someone could see —”

He squeezed once, and then his fingers sought her straining nipple.

“There’s no one to see. This is my land.”

Jason tugged her shirt up. She felt the warmth of the sunshine on her breasts. And then his mouth was on her. Tugging and tasting. Ashley bucked against him.

His free hand moved to her shorts, unbuttoning them in a swift move. Ashley bridged up so he could pull them off. He freed himself from his own

shorts before settling between her legs.

“Promise me you’ll stay, Ashley,” he whispered, darkly as he probed her center.

“I promise!” As soon as she gave him the words he thrust into her. Ashley gasped at the invasion and bent her knees to take more.

His thrusts were swift and hard, on the borderline of losing control. The rocky ground bit into her back, but Ashley didn’t care. He filled her completely, and that was what she craved.

Jason suddenly released her hands and lifted her from the rock. “I don’t want to hurt you.” He sat up and lifted her to straddle him. “Ride.” He positioned himself under her so all she had to do was sink down on him. Inch by glorious inch until he was completely sheathed in her.

He recaptured her breast with his mouth and she rode until they came together in a swift explosion of need. It was her name that he half-shouted to the trees.

Always her name.

###

“I think I’ll take a long, hot bath in that incredible tub of yours,” Ashley decided when they returned to the house. “I’ve got pine needles and dirt in places they don’t belong.”

“This is the first time that tub will have been used.” He put the backpack down on the kitchen island.

“You’re not the ‘soak all your troubles away’ kind of guy?” she teased.

He laughed and guided her up the stairs, hands on her hips. “I’m more of a ‘shower and solve the troubles’ kind of guy.”

“No one has used the tub? How does anyone resist that temptation?”

“I’ve never brought anyone besides family here.”

She believed him. For God knows what reason, she was the only woman he had ever brought here. She bit her lip to keep the smile from splitting her face. So this is what it felt like to be special. To be treasured.

Jason smacked her on the butt playfully. “Come on, let’s get your bath ready.”

He led her into the bathroom and turned on the tub’s faucet. “Keep an eye on the temperature.”

He handed her the robe. "OK, beautiful, take it all off. I'll do some laundry while you relax."

Ashley complied, tugging her shirt over her head. She had no idea where her shredded bra had gotten to. It was probably back on the trail somewhere. She shed her shorts too and stood naked in front of him.

His gaze warmed her skin.

Jason stepped forward to cup her breast, hefting it in his palm. "You are too perfect." He dropped a kiss on her forehead and slid his thumb over her nipple. It went taut. "God, the way you respond to me."

He stepped back abruptly. "You'd better get in the tub now before I make love to you again. Soon you'll be too sore to walk."

Ashley grinned as he gathered up her clothes and hurried out of the room. She loved that her body had this effect on him. It felt ... powerful.

Pulling her hair up in a knot, she returned to the tub and slid beneath the water's surface. The steamy heat enveloped her and teased a sigh out of her.

Sunlight filtered through the tall windows warming her face and arms. She cracked an eyelid long enough to appreciate the greens and blues beyond the window.

Perfection.

Minutes later, the snap of a camera brought her back. She spotted Jason standing inside the doorway, a tray at his feet and cell phone in hand.

"Hey!"

"Sorry to disturb you, but I had to commemorate the tub's maiden voyage. You looked so peaceful." He tucked the phone away in a pocket and picked up the tray.

"I thought your bath could use some wine." He settled the tray across the tub lip.

"Now this is service," Ashley teased, eyeing the wine and small plate of cookies.

"It's just an excuse to see you naked again."

"Insatiable."

"I could say the same about you." His hand dipped into the water to tease the pink tip of her breast.

Ashley's head dropped back against the tub and she fought a moan. "I can't help it. Every time you touch me I want more."

"Close your eyes."

Skeptical, she raised an eyebrow, but did as she was told.

“Just relax. Let me touch you.”

Ashley let his hand stroke over her breasts, gently tugging and kneading, before slipping lower beneath the water between her thighs.

She opened for him, letting her knees fall to the sides. He stroked gently at first, circling her sensitive center with the pads of his fingers.

Ashley let her head lull back. Eyes closed, she let herself drift on the sensations.

She felt his other hand enter the water to cup her breast and sighed. It was pleasure that she floated on. Pleasure given by his gentle hands.

Ashley felt the subtle tensing between her legs and knew he was going to take her over the edge.

“You’re such a gift to me, Ashley. Let me give you this.”

This time she didn’t stifle her moan. She lifted her hips to press against his hand. “That’s right, beautiful,” he whispered. She felt his fingers probing and she opened, accepting them. They slid inside her as he tugged harder on her nipple.

“Oh, Jason,” she sighed.

“Let it happen, Ashley. Let me take you.” His fingers withdrew and then thrust into her again. He drove her higher until she closed on his fingers and came in slow, sweet waves. Her hands fisting in the water.

###

They spent the evening relaxing outside. Dinner was hot dogs and s’mores cooked over the fire in the outdoor fireplace.

Ashley licked melted chocolate from her thumb. “Who knew roughing it could be so delicious?”

Jason leaned over to pop her index finger in his mouth. “Mmm, I agree.”

“Hey! Get your own chocolate smeared fingers!” She slapped at him playfully.

They settled back and watched the fire. Ashley took a sip of her beer. “You know it strikes me as strange that we can be this intimate and yet I hardly know you.”

“I’m pretty sure you now know every inch of my body.”

Every perfect, chiseled inch. “Isn’t there more to you than just a hot body?”

“Isn’t that enough?” he teased.

Ashley rolled her eyes. “OK, Mr. Deflection. How hard do you have to work at this whole mysterious thing? Are there times when you really want to open up and tell someone about your day? Or are you just naturally a vault?”

He took a long pull from his beer. “No one is naturally a vault. It’s just not easy for me to open up.”

“Were you born that way, or did some girl break your heart?” Ashley asked.

“Maybe a little bit of that. Do you trust me?”

“What does trust have to do with talking about yourself?”

“Now who’s deflecting?” Jason smirked.

“Smart ass.”

“I think there are layers of trust. There’s the casual trust where you tell someone about your day and you trust them to care enough to listen. Then there are deeper layers where some people think they can trust someone not to hurt them.”

“And you think that’s bullshit?”

“Don’t you?”

Ashley took another swallow. “Do you think all people are untrustworthy?”

“Yes. It’s just to what degree? Everyone becomes untrustworthy at some point. Whether they lie or cheat or steal or backstab. It’s just better not to let yourself be vulnerable like that.”

“Well aren’t you just a little ray of sunshine?”

“I prefer to think of myself as a realist. I’m surprised that you, of all people don’t agree.”

“I don’t think that all people are going to turn out to be like Steven. At least, God, I hope they aren’t. That would be an incredibly narcissistic world.”

“You haven’t answered my question yet. Do you trust me?”

“I don’t know you well enough yet to decide.”

“Touché.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ashley woke Sunday morning to a fully-dressed Jason delivering a cup of coffee.

“It’s early,” she groaned. “Why are you wearing clothes?”

He sat on the edge of the bed. “I have some bad news. I’m hoping the coffee will help make up for it.”

“We have to go home, don’t we?”

“My grandfather set a meeting with the investigators today.”

“So it’s almost over?”

He set the coffee on the nightstand and stroked a hand through her hair. “Almost.”

Ashley sat up and reached for the mug. “OK. I can be ready to go in twenty.”

“I’ll make it up to you, Ashley. I promise.”

The ride home was quiet, with both of them lost in their own thoughts. Jason’s phone rang several times, but he let it go to voicemail.

Ashley saw a text from Georgie, from Saturday asking her how her trip to her parents’ was.

Trip to parents canceled. Spent weekend in the woods for an orgasm marathon with my bearded lov-ah. Call you later!

Georgie replied seconds later.

Squeal!!

Ashley grinned. It would be fun filling Georgie in on the details of the weekend. It made her think of her conversation with Jason about trust.

She shared things with Georgie because she knew her friend cared about her. But sometimes that same reason caused her to keep things from people. She hadn’t shared any of her earlier relationship troubles with Steven with anyone. And maybe that was partly because she didn’t want her friends or her parents worrying about her and partly because she didn’t want them judging her for staying ... or now, leaving.

She thought about how her parents would react when she told them about why she and Steven were no longer together.

Maybe sometimes withholding was kinder when it was for protection.

###

It was just after 9 in the morning when they pulled into Jason's driveway. One of the garage doors raised soundlessly, and Jason pulled the Jeep inside.

"We're back."

"Back to reality," Ashley echoed flatly.

He turned to her in his seat. "Ashley, no matter what happens this week, I want you to remember this weekend."

"Believe me, Jason, it's burned into my brain. I'll probably still be fantasizing about this weekend when I'm 90."

He squeezed her thigh. "Good girl. I'm counting on that. Are you going home?"

"I guess so," Ashley sighed. "I should catch up on a few mountains of laundry and dishes that I let slide while I was playing spy games."

"Are you going to stay there when this is all over?"

"I hadn't really thought about it yet, but probably not. I can't afford the place on my own and I certainly don't have any sentimental feelings about it."

Jason nodded. "Text me when you get home, OK?"

"As long as you text me after your meeting."

"Deal." He leaned forward. "Now give me a kiss that I'll remember."

###

Ashley arrived home a little disheveled, but still smiling. The kiss had gone a bit farther than she had planned. She felt like a teenager sneaking home after making out with her boyfriend.

A teenager sneaking home to find a pair of stilettos in a jumble with a man's belt and tie just inside the door.

She quietly set her bag down. A quick survey of the kitchen revealed two wine glasses — the good crystal ones that Steven had insisted on — and a woman's Coach clutch tossed carelessly on the breakfast bar.

Victoria.

Ashley's heart started to pound as adrenaline coursed through her system. It would end today. All she had to do was walk into that bedroom.

Taking slow, measured breaths, she sat down on a barstool. She wanted to plan it out, do it right.

But there were just some things that required you go with the flow.

She picked up one of the nude heels by the door and dropped it into the trashcan before grabbing a bottle of ketchup from the refrigerator.

She opened Victoria's clutch and squeezed the contents of the bottle into it. Closing the metal clasp, she set it neatly back in its place.

The walk down the hallway to the bedroom door seemed to last forever. Her heart thudded in her ears as she reached for the handle.

Don't back down, Ashley. Don't back down. You can do this. She took a deep breath and shoved the door open hard enough that it bounced off the wall. Two heads popped up from the rumpled bed.

"Get. Out."

Her voice must have carried a pretty high threat level because Steven and Victoria both bolted naked from the bed.

Ashley stepped into the room and grabbed the slinky cocktail dress that was in a heap on the floor. She hurled it at the retreating blonde head.

"Get out of my house!"

"Whoa, Ash! Calm down!"

Steven was busy trying to yank on a pair of pants backwards.

"Calm down? I come home and find you in my bed with some skank from your office and you want me to calm down?"

"Are you going to let her talk about me that way?" Victoria shrieked, storming back into the bedroom, her dress partially on.

"What part of 'get out' don't you understand?" Ashley yelled. She grabbed the framed engagement picture off of the dresser and hurled it at the wall behind Victoria.

"Steven!" Victoria screamed.

Steven, still fighting with his pants, tripped and fell in the doorway. Victoria stormed past him with Ashley hot on her heels.

"Babe, I can explain!" He stumbled to his feet, following them down the hallway.

Ashley found Victoria frantically gathering her things in the kitchen.

"If you aren't out of here in 10 seconds I'm calling the cops."

"You have no grounds. I'm visiting my *boyfriend* in his *home*."

“Why don’t you take your boyfriend to your home and get out of mine?”

“Listen, Ash, let’s talk this out.” Barefoot, with suit pants on backwards, Steven was pulling a t-shirt over his head.

She hurled one of the wine glasses at him.

“She’s a crazy bitch,” Victoria shrieked, and ran for the door.

“What are you waiting for?” Ashley threw his car keys at him and hit him squarely in the forehead. “Get out.”

The sudden quiet in the loft was overwhelming. Hands on hips, Ashley surveyed the mess. It was no longer hers to clean up.

Her phone signaled a text, but she ignored it. She had a lot to do.

It took her the better part of three hours to meticulously pack her things. She called a moving and storage company for same day pick up and gave them Steven’s credit card when they named the hefty fee.

She didn’t know where she was going to go. But she was done here.

Ashley briefly thought about using Steven’s credit card to put herself up in Georgie’s hotel, but dismissed the idea. She didn’t want any more ties to him. Besides, he probably couldn’t afford it anyway.

She took a final tour of the apartment, making sure she wasn’t leaving anything important behind. It was amazing to realize how much wasn’t important. She had left nearly everything, taking only what was officially hers, which amounted to three suitcases, fifteen banker boxes, and a few odd pieces of furniture.

Back in the kitchen, she calmly put her engagement ring in a sandwich bag and dropped it in her purse. It would be her down payment on a new apartment.

“We good to go here?” One of the movers loaded up the last of the boxes on a dolly.

“Yep. Good to go.” Ashley allowed herself a small sigh as she watched her life roll out the door.

But there was no time for regrets. There was only time for forward progress.

Ashley wrestled her bags into the elevator and hit the garage button. She had no idea where she was going to go. Maybe a hotel close to work for a few days? She would start looking for a new place in the morning. Crap, what if she had to get a roommate?

The elevator doors whirred open on a neon-spandex-clad Mrs. Menifield.

“Ashley, my dear! How are ...” her voice trailed off when she noticed the suitcases. “Oh, dear. I don’t suppose you’re going on a trip?”

“No, unfortunately, Mrs. Menifield. I’m moving out.” Ashley maneuvered the first suitcase out into the garage and held the doors open for her neighbor.

“Oh I had hoped it would be your other half moving out when you broke up,” Mrs. Menifield sighed.

Ashley reached for the second bag. “I take it you’re not surprised?”

Mrs. Menifield shook her brassy red head. “When you’ve lived as long as I have, you get good at identifying assholes. And that fiancé of yours is a big one.”

“Ex-fiancé now,” Ashley said, tugging the next suitcase through the doors. “And I wish I would have had your radar.”

“You’re a smart girl. You won’t let it happen again.” She wrapped a freckled hand around the handle of the last bag. “I wish you didn’t have to go. Where are you moving?”

Ashley took the suitcase from her. “I’m not sure. I think I’m going to find a hotel for a few days before I start looking for a place to live.”

“Why don’t you stay with me?” Her neighbor’s eyes lit up behind her tinted bifocals. “I’ve got a spare bedroom. We’d be just like Laverne and Shirley!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Menifield but I couldn’t impose —”

“Nonsense! It’s perfect, and it will annoy that asshole if you stay in the building. I won’t take no for an answer.” She wrestled the suitcase away from Ashley and pulled it back into the elevator with surprising strength. “Now come on, we’ll start happy hour early!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

And a happy hour it was. With her suitcases safely tucked away in Mrs. Menifield's spare room, Ashley learned that every Sunday afternoon Mrs. Menifield hosted a well-attended happy hour.

She took a healthy sip of her third "house special." "How did I not know about this?" she asked the couple who lived in 3E.

Michael and Mitchell ran an architecture firm and were in the process of adopting twins from Vietnam.

"It's probably because no one in the building likes your ex-fiancé," Michael said, patting her hand.

"He's kind of a douche," Mitchell agreed over the rim of his glass. "He never held the elevator for us."

"And remember when he first moved in he parked in 2B's space for two weeks because it was 'closer to the door,' until he got a cease and desist letter from the HOA?"

Ashley smacked herself in the forehead a little harder than necessary. "I mean seriously, how is it that *everyone* was aware of that except me?"

"Honey, everyone has to learn it the hard way," Michael sighed, tilting his glass at her. "It takes balls to stay in the same building. It's going to send the girlfriend into a hissy fit."

Ashley nodded morosely.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Mitchell asked.

"That's the thing," Ashley sighed. "I have no idea! I've *always* known what was next. And now, my whole life comes to a screeching halt and I don't know where to go from here."

"Maybe that's just what you need, then. Something unplanned. Something that'll sweep you away."

Something like Jason Baine?

Oh crap.

The Jason Baine she was supposed to text hours ago to let him know she was home safe. Where the hell was her phone anyway?

Ashley excused herself quickly and weaved her way through half the building's tenants to get to the spare room. Not finding her phone on the first dig, she upended her purse on the bed. She dove for it as it tumbled out of the bag.

Shit. Thirteen texts and six missed calls.

Ashley sat down on the bed to work her way through them. She ignored the handful from Steven reminding her that his name was on the loft, not hers, and that technically, she couldn't kick him out of his own home. He would figure out sooner or later that it was safe to go home.

She was reading through Jason's texts when the phone rang in her hand. Startled she dropped it and had to fish it out from under the bed before answering.

"Lo?"

"Ashley? Are you all right? Where are you?" She smiled at the worry in his voice. He really did care about her.

"I'm fine. Totally fine."

"Where are you? Have you been drinking?"

"Yes, a lot. Do I sound *in-ee-bree-ated*?" She congratulated herself on her perfect enunciation.

"You sound drunk and muffled." He sounded angry.

"Oh, that's because I'm partially under a bed. Hang on." Ashley wiggled into a seated position. "Is that better?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the loft, silly."

"Jesus, Ashley, my team saw Steven and Victoria leaving the building this morning. I thought they kidnapped you or killed you!"

Ashley giggled. "That's hilarious, Jason. No kidnapping here. I got home and they were all naked in my bed, so I threw a bunch of things at them and put ketchup in her purse and made them leave. You know I'm homeless now? I was going to stay in a hotel, but Mrs. Menifield invited me to happy hour, and now I have a place to stay!"

Jason was silent for a few seconds. "Mrs. Menifield. Does she live in your building?"

Ashley nodded.

"Ashley."

"Huh?"

"Does Mrs. Menifield live in your building?"

“Yes.”

“And you moved out of your place and are staying with her?”

“Yes,” Ashley nodded. “She has a spare room. It’s decorated with kitties.” She plucked at a pink kitten pillow.

“What about all your stuff?”

“Oh that,” she waved dismissively. “The movers took it to storage today.”

“I see.”

“I’m sorry you were worried. Everything is fine.”

“And you and Steven are done?”

“Yep. Oh,” Ashley exclaimed a little too loud, “Speaking of Steven, how was your meeting with the investigators? Are they going to investigate?”

She heard the quiet sigh. “They want to meet with you.”

“Me?” Nerves fluttered in her belly.

“They just want to talk to you about what you know about Steven’s activities.”

“Do they know about us? How does that make all this look?”

“They haven’t asked those questions yet. And I don’t think the truth is going to change whether or not they choose to investigate.”

“Do I have to talk to them?” Was this ever really going to be over?

“I don’t see a way around it, Ashley. I’m sorry.”

She sighed. “When?”

“Tomorrow if possible.”

“OK. I work until 6.”

“I’ll schedule it for 6:30 at my office.”

Ashley was quiet.

“Has Steven tried to contact you?”

“A couple of times, mainly just to tell me I don’t have any right to throw him out of his house. I imagine he’s back now, unless he decided to stay with Victoria.”

“Tell me if he doesn’t leave you alone. OK?”

“I will. So what are you doing tonight?”

“You mean now that I don’t have to track down your kidnappers? I’m going to go talk to my grandfather and his lawyers about what needs to be done as soon as the investigation is underway.”

“I’ll be thinking about you,” she said before she could stop herself.

“I’m always thinking about you, Ashley.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

She fiddled with the bangle on her left wrist and took a deep breath before pushing through the frosted glass doors of Baine Security. There was nothing to be nervous about. She was just meeting with federal investigators. No big deal. It was going to be totally fine.

Then why did she feel so guilty? *She* wasn't the one attempting to commit a crime.

She smoothed the skirt of her poppy-colored wrap dress and tugged the hem of her navy blazer down. At least she looked put-together on the outside.

As instructed, Ashley bypassed the front desk and headed to Jason's office. Mona greeted her warmly and guided her down another hallway. "Don't be nervous," she whispered when they paused outside a set of doors. "You'll do just fine."

Ashley gave her a weak smile. She hoped Mona was right. She entered the room and wondered briefly if vomiting all over the plush carpet would hurt the investigation.

Jason stood at the head of the glossy table, deep in conversation with a tall man in a rumpled suit. Eli, who was busy pouring a glass of water for a striking dark-haired woman engrossed in a stack of folders, spotted her first.

"Ms. Sapienza. Thank you for joining us. I understand this is a very difficult time for you."

She felt the warmth of Jason's gaze fall on her, and her cheeks flushed. His expression betrayed nothing, but his eyes burned. "Ashley." He moved toward her and took her hand in both of his.

It was a small gesture of affection. She wasn't sure if he was sending a message to her or the investigators.

He squeezed her hand before releasing her. "I'd like to introduce you to Lenore Lewis, deputy director of the enforcement division of the SEC." The woman in the charcoal sheath dress glanced over her reading glasses and nodded. "And this is Deion Davis. Mr. Davis is an investigator."

The man extended his hand and shook hers warmly. "Thank you for coming in, Ms. Sapienza. We appreciate your time on this matter."

"It's nice to meet you both," Ashley nodded. At least Deion didn't look too scary. The scare factor of Lenore was yet to be determined.

Jason pulled out a chair for her and then took the one next to her. Under the table, his knee pressed against her leg.

"Ms. Sapienza," Lenore removed her glasses and set them down on the paperwork, "this is just an informal inquiry to see if an investigation needs to take place. Are you comfortable talking to us without a lawyer present?"

Ashley glanced at Jason and then nodded. "I think so."

"Very well then, let's start from the beginning." She put her glasses on again. "When did you start to think your fiancé was up to something?"

Ashley took a deep breath and dove in.

She spent the next hour answering questions and clarifying the timeline. Sticking to the facts that Jason had coached her on, she felt reasonably comfortable. Her voice faltered a bit when she explained the catalyst to her ending the relationship. "I don't think I really believed it until I caught him red-handed."

"An understandable reaction," Lenore said simply. "Now I think there's only one last question and we can release you from all this." She gestured with perfectly manicured hands and nodded at Deion.

He cleared his throat and consulted the notebook in front of him. "Ms. Sapienza, if you could just clarify what your relationship to Mr. Baine is."

Ashley felt Jason stiffen imperceptibly beside her. "I'm sorry, you'll have to clarify which Mr. Baine we're discussing. Since there are two in the room."

A chuckle went around the table. Even Lenore cracked a smile.

"I can tell you that if my grandson doesn't have the sense to have his eye on her, I certainly do," Eli said with an exaggerated wink.

"Your grandson has more than enough sense and a terrible sense of timing," Jason said mildly. "Ms. Sapienza and I are involved. We were not at the beginning of all this, but we are now. Do you anticipate this posing a problem with moving forward?"

Lenore studied first Jason and then Ashley for a long moment. "Let's hope not," she said finally. "As long as you can prove that you never met before the party, I don't believe it will be too much of a sticking point."

Ashley sighed quietly. It wasn't the best answer, but it wasn't the worst, either. "So what happens next?" she asked.

Lenore interlaced her fingers. "The information you've brought to our attention warrants looking into. I can't tell you how long that will take. It could be weeks or even months. However, the cooperation of Mr. Baine and the rest of the company should help speed things along."

"Will I have to testify?"

"It's a definite possibility. Would you be willing to?"

Ashley nodded. "You can compel me to testify even if I wasn't, right?"

"Yes, but it's much easier on everyone when witnesses are willing."

"Is there anything else you need me to do now?"

Deion chimed in. "Not at this point, Ms. Sapienza. Mr. Baine has offered us his services for the investigation, but your part is over for now, unless you come across any new information." He shuffled his papers and closed the folder. "Our investigators work quietly both to ensure that evidence isn't destroyed, or in the case of false information, reputations of individuals and firms remains intact. So the less you say about this, the better."

"I understand. Thank you for hearing me out." She stood and Jason rose with her.

"If you don't mind, I'll see Ms. Sapienza out." He didn't wait for agreement, but put his hand on the small of her back and guided her out of the room.

Once in the hallway, Ashley allowed herself to sag against the wall. She blew out the breath she felt like she had been holding for an hour. "I'm so glad that's over."

Jason put his hands on her shoulders. "You did a excellent job, Ashley. I can't thank you enough. My family owes you everything. I owe you everything."

He pulled her against him and Ashley breathed him in, running her hands under his jacket. Jason looked up and down the hallway and pulled her into another door. It was a smaller, more intimate conference room with a round glass table and tall bookcases flanking the lone window.

He leaned against the door to close it, and Ashley heard the quiet snap of the lock. "Don't you have to get back in there?" she asked, eyebrow raised.

"I have a few minutes."

The dove for each other. His mouth crushed into hers as she frantically worked his jacket free. "We can't do this here," she murmured against his

mouth.

“Definitely not.” His hands streaked up her sides under her blazer. She worked one arm free and then the other and dove back into the kiss. They stumbled backwards into the table.

Jason yanked the tie on her dress open and freed her breast from the cup of her bra. His palm teased her sensitive peak.

Ashley reached for his belt. This was insane. These were not the actions of a normal, sane person, who had just been interviewed by investigators, she warned herself. But it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was Jason's hands and mouth on her.

Ashley pulled the zipper down and slid her hand inside. He was ready and waiting for her.

“We have to stop.” He said it desperately as her fingers closed around his shaft.

She ignored him, working his length with swift strokes. He groaned against her ear and Ashley found herself being spun around. He forced her down, bending her over the table. The cool glass shocked her bare breast.

Jason spread her legs with his knee and slid her dress over her hips. Bared to him, she felt his hand gently trail over her exposed curves.

At his mercy, she should have felt submissive, but Ashley only felt power.

“What you do to me,” he whispered, as he slid his palm reverently over her cheek trailing around to her hip. His fingers gripped the cotton edge of her thong, pulling it down her thighs. He left it there, just above her knees and leaned into her, over her.

Ashley pushed against him when she felt his erection nestle at the junction of her thighs.

His arms snaked around her, grasping her breast and freeing the other. And with a deft thrust, he was inside her.

She bit her lip to keep the moan silent. His hands squeezed reflexively as he drove into her again and again. Short, sharp thrusts, each one eliciting a soft grunt from him.

He was lost in her.

Ashley rocked her hips back to meet him. Harder. Faster. Their skin slicked with sweat. Her nipples pebbled against his palms.

He brought a hand between her legs and stroked. The first shudder of his release, deep inside her, brought Ashley to her own.

“My God, Ashley. How do you do this to me?” He whispered against her shoulder, tremors still consuming them.

Straightening, he ran his hands down her sides. “Are you OK? Did I hurt you?”

Ashley sighed against the table, her breath fogging the glass. “You’re going to have to clean this before your next meeting in here.”

Jason slapped her lightly on the butt before pulling her back to standing. “Have dinner with me tonight.”

She turned to face him. “Yes.”

He framed her face with his hands. “Where do you want to go? I’ll take you anywhere.”

“Your house. I’ll make dinner.”

Jason dropped a kiss to her mouth. “Perfect. Wait —” He looked concerned. “Can you cook?”

“Very funny.” She tied her dress back into place and smoothed the skirt over her legs. “I’ll be at your place at 7. Don’t be late.” She patted his cheek and swept out of the room. “Try not to look like you just had sex when you go back in there,” she called over her shoulder.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Nothing was going to ruin her mood, Ashley thought as she floated across the garage to the elevator. This was a new beginning for her. And one worth being excited about.

She heard her name called from a row over and waved to Michael and Mitchell as they approached.

“Well someone looks smug and happy right now,” Mitchell teased.

Ashley felt her cheeks flush. “It’s a beautiful spring evening. What’s not to be happy about?”

“That’s not a spring evening smile,” Michael said, pointing at her face. “There’s only one thing that puts a smile like that on someone’s face.”

Ashley laughed and stabbed the elevator button. “What have you two been doing today?”

Michael held up shopping totes overflowing with produce. “Farmers market. Mitchell saw a documentary on juicing this weekend.”

“It’s going to be amazing.” Mitchell hugged the tote.

“Yeah. Kale juice. Amazing.” Michael rolled his eyes.

Ashley laughed.

The doors began to close but halted when a man’s arm thrust through the opening.

Steven. And Victoria.

Ashley stepped back against the wall, her breath leaving her.

“Oh, goodie,” Victoria hummed. She gave Ashley a once over and turned her back on her.

“Uh, we can take the next one,” Steven said, backing out of the car.

“No, we can’t.” Victoria grabbed his arm and pulled him back in.

Michael and Mitchell moved to flank Ashley while Steven crowded closer to the button panel.

“How about I cook you a nice, romantic dinner tonight,” Victoria purred to Steven, wrapping her arm through his.

Michael cleared his throat dramatically.

“How’s your cough, dear? I thought it was getting better,” Mitchell winked at his partner.

“Bitch,” Michael coughed into his hand. “Horrible person. Ugly shoes.”

Victoria shrieked and lunged at him. Steven caught her inches before her blood red nails raked across Michael’s face.

“Pathetic skank,” Michael coughed even louder.

Mitchell patted him on the back. “Come on, how about we get you some nice, romantic cough medicine.”

Steven was too busy trying to contain the irate Victoria to notice when the doors opened and the three of them exited in a fit of laughter.

###

Ashley arrived at Jason’s promptly at 7. She rang the bell and shifted the load in her arms. Jason opened the door immediately.

“What’s all this?” he asked, reaching for the box and bags she carried.

Ashley side-stepped him and hurried through the door. “You answered the door about one second after I rang the bell. Were you hovering?” She set everything down on the foyer table.

Jason pointed to the chair in the foyer that had a tablet and bottle of water next to it. “I was waiting for you.”

“That’s very sweet,” she said, rising up on her tiptoes to kiss him.

“I’ve never sat in that chair before. It’s not very comfortable.”

Ashley stepped back to look at him. He was still dressed in his suit pants. He had discarded the jacket and tie and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. She nodded. “Just what I was afraid of. You’re inappropriately dressed for our evening plans.”

Jason glanced down at his clothing. “Exactly what are our plans?”

Ashley handed him a gift bag. “These are for you. Consider them your uniform for tonight. Go put them on and meet me downstairs.”

“Downstairs? Is this your way of asking for a rematch?”

Ashley gave him a playful shove toward the stairs. “Go change. I’ll see you downstairs.”

She paused long enough to enjoy the view of him climbing the stairs and then hustled down to the lower level.

When Jason returned minutes later, he found her plopping steaming slices of pizza on paper plates.

“What do you think? Am I more appropriate now?” He spread his arms.
Ashley grinned. He had changed into plaid pajama pants and a t-shirt.
“Very nice.” She nodded her approval.

“I see you are following a similar dress code.”

Ashley twirled in her sweat pants and long sleeve college t-shirt.

“This is a test to see if you still have the ability to be human on occasion.
And if you want a girlfriend who lounges around the house in pearls and
heels on a Monday night, you’ll be very disappointed in me.”

“I find that hard to imagine.” Jason brought his hands to rest on her hips.
“So what are our plans besides pizza and pajamas?”

Ashley handed him the movie she had tucked in the grocery bag.

“*Rebecca.*”

“It’s Alfred Hitchcock and it’s amazing.”

“Well let’s get started then,” Jason said, grabbing the pizza plates and
leading the way to the sofa.

They dined on hot, greasy pizza and chips with beer and watched the
movie on the huge flat screen. As the flames consumed Manderley, Jason
paused the movie. “What is her name?” he frowned.

“Joan Fontaine?”

“Yes. What’s her character’s name in the film?”

“Aren’t you smart, Mr. Baine?” Ashley wiggled higher into a seated
position. “Her character doesn’t have a name.”

“The main character of the movie is a woman without a name and the
movie is named after a woman who isn’t even in it?”

Ashley nodded. “It’s amazing what just the memory of the presence of a
woman can do to a man, isn’t it?”

Jason took a long pull of his beer and pushed play.

Ashley settled back against him watched as the flames on the screen
licked at the R on the bed.

“Good movie,” she sighed happily. “So, how did the rest of your day with
the investigators go?”

“You mean could they tell that I just got done having hot, sweaty sex with
a beautiful woman when I went back to the meeting?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“No one said anything to me, but I didn’t realize until after everyone left
that my hair was standing up and my fly was down.”

Ashley collapsed laughing. “You’re joking, right? *The Jason Baine* doesn’t walk around with his fly down.”

“*The Jason Baine* also doesn’t completely lose control during the workday and bang his girlfriend into oblivion in an empty conference room. I’m not convinced that you’re a good influence on me.”

“*I’m* not a good influence on *you*? Since I met you, I’ve spied, I’ve lied, I’ve been interviewed by investigators. I’ve been rudely accosted in an office. I think the problem here is you —.”

The pillow to her face cut her off. “Pretty sure I don’t usually start pillow fights either, but in your case I’ll make an exception.”

Ashley recovered from her shock quickly enough to plow a cushion into him, and the battle was on.

She went on the attack and he vaulted over the couch. The battle raged until Ashley ran out of pillows and resorted to using the last weapons she had at her disposal. She flashed him.

He plucked her off of the couch and pulled her down to the floor. “That’s not fighting fair.”

The kiss was teasing, but quickly deepened in intensity. Ashley sighed against his mouth and wrapped her arms around him. This was the right way to spend a weeknight.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

When she woke up in the lonely acreage of Jason's bed the sun was still low in the sky. He was probably making her breakfast, she thought with a sleepy smile.

She stretched luxuriously and rolled closer to the nightstand to check her phone. She still had 15 minutes before her alarm, but since she was already awake and scheduled to be at the store by 10, it was probably a good idea to get moving.

She dressed quickly and padded down the stairs. Jason wasn't in the kitchen, but there was coffee. She helped herself to a mug and wandered in the direction of his office.

The doors to his office were slightly open and Ashley heard voices. She paused, not wanting to interrupt business.

"Off the record, Lenore told me they would be fast-tracking this. I can't have Victoria hovering around the company wreaking havoc for much longer." It was Eli on speakerphone.

"I understand, Grandfather. But it's in the hands of the authorities. I'll do what I can to guide them to the evidence quickly."

"I know," Eli sighed. "But when you get to be my age you get to be a little impatient when it comes to getting what you want, which can be dangerous. I see that trait in you, sometimes."

Ashley peered into the room. Jason had his back to her, his chair swiveled to face the windows behind his desk. He scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"I'm an extremely patient man, Grandfather."

Eli harrumphed. "That's why you decided to cut your weekend short to send that poor girl home early to catch them in the act? That's not patience, my boy. That was a dangerous decision to make. You're very lucky it worked out, but I warn you. Using people like that isn't good for the soul."

Ashley felt icicles form in her belly. Without thinking, she stepped into the room. Jason turned in his chair.

Their eyes met, and she saw the pain she felt mirrored in his face.

“Grandfather, I have to call you back.” Jason hung up the phone and rose.

“You knew.” Ashley’s voice rang out sharply. “You knew that Steven and Victoria were at the loft.”

“Ashley —”

“You sent me home early on purpose to catch them. Why? Why would you do that, Jason?”

“Ashley, please listen. I couldn’t let you go home to him after that weekend.”

“So you humiliated me instead.”

“Ashley —”

She held up a hand. “Stop. Were you afraid that I was going to tip him off?”

“No.”

She crossed her arms over her chest.

“How can you be so cold? So manipulative? It’s quite calculating to play with people’s lives. This was all about Victoria, wasn’t it?”

“Whatever I did, whatever I’m doing to take Victoria down needs to be done.”

“Why? What did she do to you that was so horrible?” Ashley paced.

“Sure, she’s a bitch. But what did she do that has you so desperate to destroy her?”

Arms folded, his face was stone.

Ashley stopped her pacing and turned to face him. “It doesn’t even matter, does it?”

“Everything matters,” he said quietly.

“You know what matters to me? I have no home. I may have to testify against my ex-fiancé, who I caught in *my* bed with his mistress. I have been humiliated. And the very worst part is that this is all part of your plan. Do you even care?” Her voice cracked on the word and she spun around to hide her face.

“Ashley,” she heard him round his desk.

“I’m such an idiot. I didn’t even put it together when you told me your team saw Steven and Victoria leave. They had to be there, watching for something.”

Jason held up his hands and took another step forward. “Please, just listen.”

“Stay away from me! Leave me alone.” With that, she pushed through the terrace doors and fled.

The smooth stone stairs were cool beneath her bare feet. Ignoring the expansive river view, she hurried in the direction of the driveway. She was going to leave this place behind her forever.

The tears fell freely on her cheeks now and she swiped at them impatiently. She had let herself be humiliated long enough.

Why was it that Jason’s betrayal hurt her more than Steven’s? Steven was the one who was supposed to love her and be building a life with her. Yet it was Jason’s callousness that drove into her heart.

Why was *that* the sucker punch?

The whole thing was a game. From the racquetball court to the cabin. Everything had been planned to gain her trust. What a convincing player Jason was. She shivered in the sunlight as flashes of him touching her raced through her mind.

It had felt so real to her. Had it meant nothing to him? Was anyone that skilled as a player?

One thing was sure. She was done with it all. Propelled by anger, Ashley rounded the house. She had wasted more than enough of her time on both of them.

“Ashley!” Jason’s voice called down the path behind her.

The anger spiked. She should run. She should get in her car now and drive away. But she stood her ground. This was a battle she craved to have.

“Ashley!” Jason rounded the house, sounding relieved. “Are you okay?”

She let out a short, sharp laugh when he reached for her arm. She yanked away as if he had scaled her. “Don’t touch me. I’m not some pawn to be used. I told you to leave me alone.”

Ignoring her warning, he grabbed for her wrist. “Listen to me. Let me explain —”

Ashley shoved him, setting him back a half step, but not before Ashley saw the blaze in his eyes.

She turned and broke into a run toward the river.

He was pounding down the path behind her. Sprinting now, she rounded another bend to where the yard opened to the riverfront with a boathouse the size of a small house. He was closing in on her, but she kept running.

She should have run faster.

His hand closed on her shoulder yanking her backwards against him. She whirled around in his arms to face him.

“I told you not to run.” He wasn’t just angry, he was furious.

Ashley gasped for breath, noting his was obnoxiously even.

He shook her once, hard, and she shoved at his chest without gaining an inch of freedom. He merely tightened his hold on her. They froze that way, with his hands digging into her shoulders and hers fisted against his chest. He was so tall, he all but loomed over her. Now his breathing was as ragged as hers.

“You will listen.” His grip was bruising.

Ashley put up a respectable fight, but found herself flat on her back in the dewy grass with Jason on top of her. He pinned her hands overhead with one hand.

“I am going to kick your ass,” Ashley ground out between clenched teeth.

He shifted his hips into hers and she felt the entire length of his hard-on pressing into her. “Shut up and let me explain.”

Ashley growled. It was hard to think, or stay livid, with the devil grinding against her.

“I did know that Steven and Victoria were there that morning.”

“What a nice little joke for you,” she snapped.

Jason clamped his free hand over her mouth. “Shut up.” He said it mildly as if asking her to pass the salt. “I couldn’t let you go back to him and play house. Not after that weekend. Even if it meant jeopardizing the investigation.”

Ashley went still and he slowly removed his hand.

“I’m listening,” she said as haughtily as her current position allowed.

“I couldn’t stand the thought of saying good-bye to you and sending you home to continue pretending that you were a good little fiancée. The thought of you sleeping next to him ...”

He cleared his throat. “I couldn’t let that happen. So I did what I always do and manipulated the situation to get what I wanted.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me not to go back?”

“Because if you left suddenly, they, or Victoria at least, would have been suspicious. She might have tried to delay their plans.”

“So you were using me to get what you wanted on both fronts.”

“Yes.”

“And you expect me to believe that you care about me?” She was getting angry again.

“This,” he pressed against her, “is real. What you make me feel is real. What I make you feel is real.”

“What you make me feel is hurt and betrayed and angry.”

“That’s not all you feel.” His hand settled on her belly and need ignited.

He groaned and shifted his weight. “Look, I can’t concentrate with you writhing under me. If I let you up, will you stay and talk or are you going to take off again?”

“I’ll play it by ear.”

“Fair enough.” He moved off of her and sat next to her.

“You lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie. I deliberately withheld information.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Don’t argue semantics with me.”

“Ashley.” He waited until she turned to look at him. “I’m sorry. Until I met you, there wasn’t anything more important to me than taking Victoria down.”

“Uh-huh.” Ashley felt like the sarcasm was leaking through her pores. “Why do you need to get rid of her? What did she do, besides be a miserable bitch?”

Jason stared off over the river. Several moments passed before he took a deep breath and began.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Ashley, no one knows this. I’ve never told anyone,” Jason began.

“I met Victoria when she was 15 and I was 18. It was the summer before I left for college, and my father announced he was getting married again. He moved Victoria and her mother into our home right before the wedding.

“She was a beautiful girl already. And she knew it. She used it to get things. And if her looks didn’t get her what she wanted, she used other ... tools.”

Jason got to his feet and started pacing. “One night, she came into my bedroom and laid on my bed. Started taking her clothes off. She wanted me, she said. But even then, I knew she was poison. And she was 15 and she was my stepsister. I made her leave. She tried again and again. The last time I was in the shower and she came in.”

He stopped pacing and stared out over the flowing waters. “She started touching me. I was 18 in a shower with a naked girl wrapping herself around me ...”

Ashley’s stomach clenched.

“I almost let it happen. But she looked at me and had this look of triumph in her eyes and I knew I was about to give her a weapon.”

“So you stopped her.”

Jason nodded. “I stopped her. I pushed her out into the hallway, wet and naked. I told her she was nothing to me but a little girl with daddy issues and I shut and locked the door in her face.

“She pounded on the door, screaming. Saying I’d be sorry. She’d make me pay.

“By the time our parents came home she seemed normal again and I thought it was settled. Over. But it wasn’t. She started ...”

Jason paused and took another deep breath. He came back and sat down next to Ashley, careful not to touch her.

“She started doing things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Once, I found pictures in my nightstand. They were of her naked, tied to my bed. She looked scared. I don’t know how she took them.” He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. “I confronted her about them. And she got that look again in her eyes. She told me that if I didn’t do everything she asked, she would tell our parents that I was raping her.”

Ashley closed her eyes and fought the sickness growing in her belly.

“I started locking my room every time I left. I found her favorite t-shirt in the backseat of my car ripped open like someone had shredded it.”

“Did you tell your father?”

Jason shook his head. “I didn’t think he’d believe me. It would have been her word against mine, and I didn’t think he would take my side over his new wife’s. She started making me do things for her. Covering for her when she lied. I took the blame when she wrecked my father’s car. I even paid her fine when she was busted for underage drinking. I was living a nightmare in my own home.

“When I left for college, I thought it would finally stop. By that time she had other targets in her sights. I thought she would forget and finally leave me alone. To be safe I stayed away. I went to college out of state and took summer jobs there so I wouldn’t have to come home.

“During my junior year. I met someone. Her name was Jordan. It got serious. We started talking about our lives after college. And for the first time since my father married Victoria’s mother, I started to feel hopeful about the future. And then I made a mistake. I brought her home on Christmas break to meet the family.”

Jason plucked a blade of grass from the ground and rolled it between his fingers.

“Victoria pretended to befriend Jordan. I was so scared to leave them alone together. But Victoria arranged a girls day out, and I couldn’t say no without seeming like a control freak. When they came back, Jordan was in tears. She packed her things and told me she never wanted to see me again.

“Victoria drove her to the airport, and when she returned she told me what she did. She told Jordan that I had been sexually abusing her for years and that she felt strong enough to tell Jordan the truth because she wanted to save her from the same fate.

“Jordan transferred to a different school and I never saw her again. My father and Victoria’s mother divorced shortly thereafter. But it wasn’t

because he was sleeping with just any coked up socialite. It was because he slept with Victoria.”

Ashley gasped.

“She got him drunk one night when her mother was away on one of her spa trips. It was right before she turned 18. She did it to get back at her mother for something stupid. It was all a game to her. Self-destruct her mother’s marriage, treat people like puppets. In the end, my grandfather made a payout to her and her mother to keep them quiet. But she just kept coming back. That’s why she works at his company.”

Jason picked up a small stone and tossed it into the river.

“She’s dangerous, and she wouldn’t hesitate to bite the hand that feeds her.”

He dropped his gaze to the ground.

“She thought she won the day she talked to Jordan, but she didn’t realize what an enemy she had made. I’ve been waiting for this opportunity since I met her. I am so close to finally being free. But I need you. I need your help to make this happen.”

“Why did Jordan believe Victoria over you?” Ashley crossed her arms.

“Victoria is very convincing. She can turn on the tears better than any actor. It took years before my grandfather started to see through her.”

“How do I know any of this is true?”

Jason grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Ashley, you know it is. You know it the same way you know how I feel about you.”

“How do you feel about me?”

“Like I want you and need you. Like I can’t stop thinking about you. Do you know how many times I’ve lost my train of thought in meetings because I was wondering what you were doing? If you were thinking about me? I love you, Ashley Sapienza. And I’m not going to let you go. I will fight for you. I will do whatever it takes to prove to you that you have my heart and that you can trust me.

“Now you love me. You choose to tell me you love me at this exact second and it doesn’t strike you as being manipulative as hell?”

He held her hand to his heart. “I don’t care how it seems. It’s the truth. I want to have a life with you, but I can’t have that life with Victoria around. She will hurt you to hurt me. She will use you like she uses everyone. And I can’t let that happen.”

“You can’t control everything, Jason. You can’t just force things to work out the way you want them to.”

“I just need —”

“Oh, no. It’s my turn now. I appreciate how hard it is for you to open up about this. But I want you to understand that just like it’s hard for you to trust, you’ve made it impossible for me to trust you. I’m not a pawn. And neither are you.”

Ashley stood up.

“Please don’t leave,” Jason whispered.

Jason, you can’t be consumed by revenge for years and then expect to just build a new life once it’s finally over.”

He looked vulnerable, human. She shook her head and looked away. Even after everything, it hurt her to see him in pain.

“I’ll give you anything. Don’t leave.”

“You know what I want?”

Jason stood and gripped her arms. “Whatever it is, it’s yours.”

“Time,” Ashley said. “And space.”

“That’s ... fair.” His gaze bore into her. “How much?”

She stepped back, out of his grasp. “No contact.”

“Ashley.”

She held up a hand. “No contact,” she repeated.

“Until when?”

“Until I decide.”

He shook his head. “I’ll give you thirty days.”

“You’re dictating to me the time I need to heal?”

“I’ve just gotten a glimpse of what kind of life is possible for us, and you expect me to just let it go without a fight? I’m not willing to do that. I will give you some time and space. But not forever. I love you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Three weeks later

The flower garden smell hit Ashley the second she opened the door.

“There you are! These came for you today,” Mrs. Menifield chirped from the kitchen. The crystal vase on the counter held the most vibrant shade of blood red roses Ashley had ever seen.

“This one said ‘Twenty-one.’” Mrs. Menifield handed over the already-opened card. “And there are twenty-one of them!”

Ashley allowed herself a moment to bury her face in the blooms. One moment of fantasy. She had thought the thirty days was a joke. Or at the very least thought Jason would forget and move on and she’d be too busy putting her life back together to notice. It hadn’t happened that way.

She hadn’t forgotten. In fact, she found herself lost in consuming fantasies about Jason more often than was comfortable. And as was evidenced by the floral jungle in Mrs. Menifield’s apartment, he hadn’t forgotten either.

She hadn’t had any contact with him, but the flowers started the next morning. And now Mrs. Menifield’s apartment looked like a very expensive wedding venue.

“I’m sorry about turning your home into a flower shop.”

The woman patted Ashley’s arm. “You and your flowers are welcome here as long as you need.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Menifield.”

She took the blooms into her bedroom and put them on the nightstand. As hurt as she was, Ashley still wanted to feel close to Jason. He had kept his word. There had been no texts, no phone calls, no visits to the store. Sometimes, she wondered if he logged into the cameras to watch her.

The truth was, she missed him. When Deion called to let her know that they would be taking Steven into custody, she wanted to reach out to Jason, but didn't. Instead, she waited in the parking garage alone so she could watch a team of law enforcement march Steven out in cuffs.

The idiot had the gall to look relieved to see her. "Ash! There's been a mistake! I need you to call Victoria for me. Tell her there's a mistake. Call my lawyer!"

Ashley shook her head sadly as he was led to a dark SUV. "The only mistake here is how much time I wasted on you."

She wanted to tell Jason about how the color left Steven's face when Deion oh so coolly said, "Thanks for your cooperation, Ms. Sapienza."

But she didn't. She stayed radio silent and tried to bury herself in work.

But Jason was never far from her thoughts. She didn't doubt his story about Victoria and her heart broke for the 18-year-old forced to sign a deal with the devil. Because of Victoria, he had been cut off from his family and lived his life in constant fear.

She loved him. She knew that.

But she couldn't trust him. He had used her in his vendetta, and she couldn't just sweep that under the rug no matter how many beautiful bouquets he sent. How was she supposed to move forward from that?

How could she be with a man whose entire life was consumed by another woman? The thirty days were almost up, and she was no closer to an answer.

Her phone rang and she dove for it. Every ring, every text she jumped to see if it was Jason. But it never was.

"Hey Deion, good news on the investigation?" Ashley said.

"Not really. We're a little stalled here. Victoria has covered her ass pretty carefully, so even with Steven turning on her, it's not enough to bring her in."

"So she gets to keep wreaking havoc until when?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I had an idea. How would you feel about playing a direct role in busting Victoria?"

Ashley flopped back on her bed. "Go on."

He briefly outlined the plan.

"Is this Jason's idea?"

"No, actually I broached it to him and he said an emphatic no. I tried to tell him that with this small of a window, this is our best bet in bringing it to a close fast, but he said something about using you as bait is never going to

happen and then very politely threw me out of his office. By the way, he doesn't look good."

She sat up. "Really?" Somehow the thought of Jason suffering as much as she was cheered her up.

"My question for you is, do you think it will work and are you willing?"

"Do you have time for coffee?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“I am so freaking excited about this,” Cara said, calmly sipping an extra dirty martini.

She was statuesque in a fuchsia halter dress and matching heels.

“Please tell me that you wake up in the mornings looking like garbage,” Ashley teased.

“Honey, it took me almost 45 minutes just to wiggle into this dress. And don’t even ask how long it took to get my hair just right.” She gave Ashley the once over. “You’re looking pretty amazing yourself, right now.”

Ashley smoothed a hand down her body-hugging strapless dress the color of the roses Jason sent. “Gotta look the part, right? Let’s get this show on the road and take down a hell bitch.”

They clinked glasses and headed toward the bar.

Ashley nodded imperceptibly in the direction of a broad-shouldered man nursing a scotch. He was checking his very expensive gold watch. “That’s him,” she whispered.

Cara nodded. They sidled up to the bar next to the man and ordered another round of drinks.

“So speaking of crazy friends,” Cara said, loud enough for the man to overhear. “How is your batshit crazy girl, Victoria?”

Ashley rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. “Van Camp? Oh don’t even get me started on her. She is seriously one bad choice away from being involuntarily committed.”

“Dish, girl. You know I love her drama.”

Ashley had felt the man next to her perk up at the mention of Victoria’s name.

“Well,” she leaned in, but didn’t lower her voice. “You know how she’s set up in her grandfather’s firm, doesn’t actually work there, has a bogus title, yadda yadda...”

“Um hmm,” Cara nodded. “Tell me how to get that job!”

“All you have to do is sleep with the CEO at your old job and then threaten to tell his wife and board of directors everything. She almost got arrested for extortion — oh and a little embezzlement — until Grandpa stepped in and smoothed things over. He paid them off and then set her up in this fake role just to keep an eye on her. Anyway, she decides that she doesn’t make a big enough paycheck for not doing anything and decides to scam this finance guy, Rocco, Rick, Rico ... something like that.”

“How?”

“Oh she’s pulling some fake insider trading bullshit to leverage this guy into giving her a job at his company.”

“Diabolical! Is she banging him, too, to keep him invested?” Cara snorted.

Ashley nodded. “Probably. That’s her MO. The stories she tells us at Pilates are ridiculous! She is the friend that no one would be surprised to see get arrested.”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” the man on Ashley’s right said, “But your friend sounds like a whack job.”

“You’re not kidding,” Ashley agreed. “Have you ever known a woman like that? You know, someone who will do anything to get what she wants, even if it means destroying someone.”

“I’ve known one or two.” He took a sip of scotch. “So what does she get out of this deal? Or does she just get off on messing with people?”

Cara laughed. “Oh she definitely gets off on messing with people. She told us once that in order to control people she purposely shows up late to meetings and tells them its because insert-name-of-corporate-big-wig wanted to meet with her to get her opinion on whatever, and the meeting ran late.”

“Well get this —” Ashley reached for her fresh drink. “Not only was she playing this Rocco/Rick guy, she was also running a similar play on one of her co-workers, I think his name was Steven. He pissed her off a few months ago, so she decided to mess with him and give him phony insider information. Promised him a fancy job at the new company and this and that. Well, the guy wasn’t very careful and just got picked up by the SEC this week!”

Cara whistled, eyebrows sky-high.

“That’s pretty serious,” the man said.

“She said she’s not worried. Said once she closes this deal, she’ll be in the clear and can just throw Rocco under the bus for anything. Or extort him

with another fake pregnancy scheme.”

“You know I always figured she’d get arrested for murder or burning down an ex-husband’s house. Insider trading sounds kind of tame for her,” Cara said.

Ashley laughed. “Give her time. She never disappoints, especially when she’s off her meds.”

“Ladies, it was a pleasure.” The man stood and straightened his jacket. “The next round is on me.” He peeled off two twenties from his billfold and threw them on the bar before hurrying off.

Cara and Ashley dissolved into giggles.

“Oh that was fun,” Ashley gasped. “Can we do this every weekend?”

“Did you see his face when you mentioned his name?” Cara hooted.

Ashley’s phone signaled a text.

“OK, here comes round two. Let’s catch up soon!” She took another sip for courage and slid off the barstool.

“Good luck,” Cara called after her.

###

Ashley spotted her quarry and paused to take a deep breath. “Here goes nothing,” she whispered.

Victoria Van Camp was pacing the hallway on her cellphone.

“Damnit, Steven. Answer the fucking phone!” She hung up and started to redial.

“Oh, honey, I don’t think he’s taking your calls anymore,” Ashley said, brushing past her.

Victoria looked up. Her eyes narrowed to slits. “Oh really, and why is that?”

Ashley shrugged daintily. “Haven’t you heard? We got back together. Well, he thinks we’re back together.” She winked. “He thought that staying with me and cooperating with the SEC was a better idea than being your little toy.”

“You’re lying.” Victoria spat out the words and stepped closer.

“Am I? Let me guess, you haven’t heard from him since Tuesday. Right?”

She saw it. The flash of worry in her eyes for just a split second.

“My, my. That seems like a long time for someone to ignore you, Victoria. Speaking of ignoring you, is Rocco Embry returning your calls?”

The color drained from Victoria’s face. “What are you talking about?” Clutching her phone, she started to dial.

Ashley smiled. “Oh you’ll find out soon enough. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to pop by my store. You know, some of us actually have jobs. Give my best to Rocco.”

She sailed past Victoria without a backward glance.

“Are you still here, Rocco? I’m running late. Eli Baine wanted to meet with me about — Hello? Hello?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

She was waiting for her car at the valet stand when her phone rang. “Great job, kid,” Deion said in her ear. “We picked up Rocco on his way out of the club as he was hanging up on Victoria. She’s blowing up his phone as we speak.”

Ashley did a little shimmy. “Man, that feels good!”

“That was a nice touch with the whole ‘running late name drop’ scenario.”

“I figured that as long as Eli did what he said he would to delay her, it would be another nail in the coffin.”

“Nicely done. You need anything else, you know what to do.”

“Thanks, Deion. See you around.”

Ashley tipped the valet and slid behind the wheel of her car. She felt good. Now there was only one thing left to do. Well, maybe two.

She parked on the side street by the alley behind the store and used the back door, remembering to re-arm the alarm once she was inside.

How many times in the past few weeks had she looked at the cameras and wondered if Jason was watching her?

She wondered how he would react when he heard about Victoria and Rocco. He probably wouldn’t be very happy with Deion and the rest of the team once he found out they had gone behind his back. But the fact that he had refused to use her as bait had given her the answer she needed.

In the office, she switched on the desk lamp and the Keurig. A nice cup of tea might help soothe her nerves.

She heard the clink of metal at the back door. Her pulse jumped. Someone was trying to pry the door open. Ashley grabbed her bag and hurried down the hallway, away from the door and onto the store floor. She pulled out her cellphone to dial 911.

“Put it down.”

Victoria strolled in, twirling a small crowbar.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in?” Ashley demanded.

“I thought it was time we had a little chat,” Victoria drawled.

“I don’t have anything more to say to you.” Ashley crossed her arms and planted.

“Oh, I think we have a lot to talk about.” Victoria said casually swinging the crowbar. “Do you realize what kind of enemy you’ve made?”

“Seeing at what a mess you’ve made of your little inside trading deal, I’m not really concerned with your follow through.”

“The mess *I* made? Everything was fine until you stuck your ugly little nose into my business. Rocco will make this deal and I will make you pay for your pathetic attempt to slow me down.”

“What about Steven?”

“Keep him.” Victoria shrugged. “I got what I needed from him and now you can have what’s left.”

“This deal wouldn’t have been possible without Steven. You’re just going to cut him out of it now?”

“Is that what he told you? That he did all the work?” she sneered.

“If he hadn’t told you about Phil —”

“You think it had to be Phil Barden. Or Steven? Or Rocco? Don’t be stupid. I could have made this deal with anyone for any information. Steven and Phil and the Tundra merger were all just handy.”

“You just use people, don’t you? You find a weapon and you exploit it.”

Victoria took another step forward. Ashley held her ground.

“I do what I have to get what I want.”

“What about Jason?”

“What about my dear stepbrother?”

“You lied about him. You threatened him. You blackmailed him.”

Victoria threw her head back and laughed. “Men are so simple. Either you reward them with sex or you threaten them with it. So he told you about us then. You two have gotten awfully close, haven’t you?”

“There is no ‘us’ between you and him.”

“He’s lived the last ten years in total fear of what I am willing to do to destroy him. Every decision he makes is because of me. You tell me if that’s not an ‘us.’”

“You tortured him in his own home.”

Victoria shrugged. “He said no to me. So I decided to make him regret it.”

“You said if he didn’t do what you wanted, you would tell your parents that he raped you.” Ashley could barely choke out the words.

“Oh, no dear. I said that if he didn’t do what I wanted I would tell everyone that he was raping me. Over and over again. Sexually assaulting his poor, little stepsister.”

“But he never laid a hand on you.”

“I didn’t need him to fuck me. I just made it look like he did. Maybe he should have. It would have been much more pleasant for him.”

“Why? So he could end up like his father? Paying you off because you got him drunk and banged him when he was practically passed out?”

“I was 17 years old. Legally a minor.”

“Oh, poor little victim Victoria. Your mommy wouldn’t let you do something so you decided to bang stepdaddy. That’ll teach her.”

Victoria laughed. “I wanted to go to Nice for spring break. She said no. And look who went to Nice for the entire summer, had her college education paid for, and landed a job at Baine Industries. I always get what I want. Don’t get in my way.”

Ashley stepped closer. “Or what?”

Victoria swung the crowbar carelessly into the glass counter. It shattered, sending shards in every direction. “Oops.”

“You broke in here and now you’re destroying private property. That’s very classy.”

“Classy is how I’m going to wreck this place and tell everyone it was you. You went crazy because I stole your fiancé. You couldn’t handle it.”

Victoria swiped her arm across the old farm table sending hand thrown pottery flying.

Ashley clenched her hands into fists. “No, classy is me ruining your deal with Rocco and sending you to jail.”

“And just how are you going to do that?”

Ashley pointed to the camera behind the cash register and then the one over the door. “Everything you’ve said has been recorded, dumb ass.”

She paused long enough to take in the cameras, nostrils flaring. Victoria launched herself at Ashley, swinging wildly with the crowbar. Ashley blocked it painfully with her left arm and swung with her right.

She felt the satisfying connection with Victoria’s perfect blade of a nose. The woman screamed and tackled Ashley to the ground.

Bits of broken glass bit into her back as she fought to get Victoria off of her. Victoria's elbow glanced off of her cheek and Ashley used the opportunity to shove her full force in the face. They rolled as one, knocking into a shelving unit.

Victoria ended up on top again, her hands closing around Ashley's neck in a vice-like grip. "I'm going to kill you," she shrieked.

There was blood.

Then there were lights and voices. And hands.

Thank God, Ashley thought, as Victoria's hands were pried off of her throat.

Strong arms lifted her off the ground. "You OK, Ashley? That was some show." Deion steadied her.

"Please tell me you heard every word," Ashley rasped, bending at the waist to catch her breath.

"Every single word. She's done. She's going away for a long time."

Ashley glanced around. "I didn't think she was going to do this much damage. Barbara is going to be so pissed."

"She broke my fucking nose!" Victoria, restrained by two officers, shrieked. Blood trickled from her face onto her chest, giving her a demonic look.

"I've been wanting to do that since I met her," Ashley said.

"She attacked me! I was defending myself!" Victoria howled.

Ashley turned her back on the scene and grabbed a box of tissues off the counter. She had what felt like a million little cuts everywhere. Her cheek ached and neck burned where Victoria's hands had been.

"Ashley!" Her heart skipped a beat.

Jason pushed through the crowd, rushing her. His hands roamed her face, her arms, her torso. "Are you OK? Are you hurt?"

She saw it, the panic, the fear in his eyes and felt tears prick her own.

"Jason." She framed his face in her hands. "I'm fine. I'm OK."

"You're bleeding."

"It's mostly Victoria's."

"You're bleeding," he said again. "Your face."

"Jason, I'm fine. Everything is fine. It's all over."

Deion came up and slapped Jason on the back. "Congratulations, Mr. Baine. Your batshit crazy stepsister is going to jail."

Jason rounded on Deion. "I said you were not to use Ashley as bait."

Deion held up his hands and Ashley stepped between them. “Jason, stop. Listen.” She pushed him back a step. “I’m fine, and Victoria is going to jail.”

His gaze flew back and forth between Deion and Ashley. He pulled Ashley into him. “You scared me. I saw her break in, and I couldn’t get here fast enough.”

“I knew you were watching.”

“You didn’t say I couldn’t check up on you. That doesn’t count as contact.”

She laughed and buried her face in his chest. “No, no, it doesn’t.”

“Are you sure you’re OK?”

“I’m better than OK. I love you, Jason Baine.”

He clutched her to him. “Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“Again.”

“I love you, Jason, and you’re finally free.” She pulled back and looked into his eyes. “She confessed to everything. We recorded every word.”

“Everything?”

She saw the understanding begin to dawn in his eyes.

“Everything. She’ll never be able to hold those lies over your head again.”

He crushed her to him again. “You love me and you freed me,” he murmured against the top of her head. “I’m never letting go of you again.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Oh, I’m furious. You deliberately put yourself in danger.”

“Well I didn’t really think she was going to bring a crowbar in here.”

“Never underestimate crazy.”

“I’m crazy about you.”

“Say it one more time.”

“I love you, Jason Baine.”

“I love you, Ashley Sapienza. I think we should get married.”

“Right now?” she teased. “Don’t you think we could find a better venue?” She glanced around at the police, the flashing lights, the sparkle of broken glass.

Jason reached into his pocket and withdrew a small velvet box.

Ashley’s heart stuttered.

“I’ve been carrying this with me every day since we spent that weekend together.” He sank down on one knee. “It belongs to you, now and forever,

just like I do.”

He opened the box and took out a vintage solitaire wrapped in a halo of smaller diamonds.

Ashley’s hands floated to her mouth. “Oh, Jason.”

“It was my grandmother’s and nothing would make me happier than to see her ring on your finger. Will you spend the rest of your life with me? I promise to spend every minute of it loving you.”

She pressed a hand to her chest where a warmth was blooming.

“Don’t think about it. I know it’s crazy, but just because it’s crazy doesn’t mean it isn’t exactly right. Because this is.”

Ashley nodded, tears clouding her eyes. “This is crazy, but I’d be crazier not to say yes. So yes, I absolutely will marry you.”

Triumphant, Jason stood and pulled her in close. “You’ve made me a very happy man, Ashley.” He slid the ring on her finger and kissed on it.

“Now when can I start calling you Mrs. Baine? Please don’t make me wait.”

“I’ll give you thirty days.”

THE END

EPILOGUE

Ashley spun her chair away from her desk to stare out the window. The summer night was just beginning with a spectacular sunset. She could hear the cacophony of crickets through the open balcony door. On a contented sigh she wiggled her bare toes into the plush carpet beneath her feet.

As a wedding present Jason had turned one of the upstairs guest rooms into a spacious home office.

She admired the sparkle of her rings under the light from the desk lamp. She was Mrs. Baine. She had given him thirty days but he only took twenty before he slid the wedding ring on her finger in front of a small crowd of friends and family in an intimate ceremony at the lake house.

And now? Now, she lived in a home with a racquetball court and woke up every morning next to Jason. They dined outside picnic-style most nights after long days at work and launched kayaks from the backyard on the weekends. Next week she would be joining him on a business trip to Rome. It would be her second Europe trip since the wedding.

She had watched Jason relax millimeter by millimeter into a new life, one free from Victoria and her threats.

Theirs was a good life.

“What’s going through your mind, Mrs. Baine?”

Ashley swiveled to face him. Jason leaned against the doorway. With his sleeves rolled up and feet bare he was the picture of relaxed.

She rose to greet him with a kiss. “You caught me. I was just thinking about how lucky I am.”

“Good, because there’s something I want to talk to you about.” Jason produced a stack of papers from behind his back and handed them to her.

Ashley crinkled her nose at the legal documents. “It’s kind of late for a prenup since we’re already married.”

He gave her a look of mock exasperation. “It’s not a prenup. Read, please.” He tapped the pages with a long finger.

Ashley skimmed the first page. “What is this?”

“It’s a purchase agreement for Dwell.”

“You’re buying the store?”

“No, you are.”

“What do you mean I’m buying it? The store is mine? What about Barbara?”

“Barbara was interested in retiring and I was interested in your future.”

“You two discussed this without even consulting me?”

“I wanted to surprise you. Consider it a wedding present.”

“And what is that brand new SUV in the garage then?”

“An engagement present.”

Ashley bit her lip to keep from smiling. “You’re doing it again. You’re swooping in and interfering with my life. Have you learned nothing?”

“I think you mean our life. And there was no swooping. I am incapable of swooping. Barbara approached me and you of all people know the store is a sound investment. Would you rather work for some stranger who buys Barbara out or do you want to work for yourself?”

“Wouldn’t I be working for you?”

“This is your store. This is your name on the agreement.”

“That’s a lot of zeros to have my name attached to it.”

“You forget what resources you have available to you. What’s mine is yours.” He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and put the papers on her desk. “I want you to be happy, Ashley. I want you to have everything.”

“Damn, you’re good at this.”

“Wait, I have one more good point to make before you concede.”

“You’re pretty cocky, Romeo.”

“When we travel, you can use the trips to buy inventory for the store.”

He had her and he knew it. It was her dream. She had even scheduled an appointment with a wholesaler in Rome while Jason was in meetings.

“What if I don’t want to run Dwell?” she asked with a dainty shrug.

“Then you can do something else and hire someone to run it.”

He leaned down and kissed her neck.

“You’re trying to distract me.”

“Tell me you want it.” His lips brushed her jawline. “Tell me it’s exactly what you want.”

Ashley sighed as he moved to her mouth.

“I want it and I want you. I want it all. It’s exactly what I want.”

About the Author

Lucy Score was born in rural Pennsylvania, land of chicken and waffles. Obsessed with books since kindergarten, Lucy began penning her own fiction in the second grade when the teacher assigned "My Life on the Mayflower" essays. She enjoys cooking, yoga, napping, and telling her rescue dog how cute she is. A freelance writer by day, Lucy dedicates her evening hours to crafting steamy romance stories so hot her family can't look her in the eye anymore.

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