



Broken
BOSS

EMMA BLAKE

BROKEN BOSS

An Enemies to Lovers
Romance

EMMA BLAKE

Edited by
CM WHEARY

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Boss's Fake Fiancée Sneak Peek](#)

Copyright © 2024 by Emma Blake

All rights reserved.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

Chapter 1

Autumn

The scent of hot chocolate fills my office as I make a sound of disgust and peel the soaked shirt from my body.

It's ruined. At least until I can get it to the dry cleaner. My new position at Sharpe Law as a senior associate isn't going to leave much time to do laundry.

With an annoyed huff, I toss the shirt to a nearby chair and strip out of my pencil skirt. It involves some serious shimmying, especially over my full hips and ass. The seams strain, and as it finally drops down to my ankles, I sigh and step out of it. What a waste of perfectly good hot chocolate.

The last thing I'm expecting to see—the last *person* I'm expecting to see—when I turn around is my new boss.

Christopher Sharpe.

His dark eyes are glued to my body. Or more accurately...

"Pink," he muses, one corner of his devilish mouth lifting in a smirk. "Interesting. You don't seem the type."

Anger and embarrassment burn through me, making my breasts and cheeks flush. But I don't move to hide the curves of my body, the peaked nipples beneath opaque fabric, or the garter belt hugging my waist.

No way—that would show weakness.

And Christopher Sharpe, the man I hate with every fiber of my being, will

never see me weak.

It was a vow I made years ago. I plan on keeping it now that I've finally made it into his law firm, one of the most prestigious in New York City.

"What happened?"

I tell him the truth. Almost.

I am a lawyer, after all.

"An intern knocked into my coffee."

One perfectly manicured dark brow raises as he questions, "Coffee? Hmm. Smells sweet."

The way he says *sweet* does things to my body that I don't want to acknowledge.

"Can I help you?" Arms crossed under my breasts, I ignore the way they jostle as I cock a hip.

Chris Sharpe definitely *doesn't* ignore them. His gaze drops from my face to my chest. He looks amused...but that's it.

"I've never been one for coffee, but you're changing my mind."

He's trying to lighten up an awkward situation. Not what I was expecting, given his reputation.

"Is there a reason you're in my office?" I fully expect him to stride farther into the room, overconfident and cocky, assuming that I—like so many other women out there—will fall for his charm and into his bed.

I've been watching Chris Sharpe closely over the years. He's a self-made billionaire, a well-respected prosecutor-turned-defense lawyer, and a notorious rogue.

He doesn't move from his position, leaning against the open door that leads to the balcony attached to my office. A small perk for such a heavy workload as an associate. He must've come in when I was meeting with my last client in one of the conference rooms.

To my surprise, Mr. Sharpe's smirk drops. His features, which are frustratingly handsome, shift into a dark brooding.

"No. I apologize." His fleeting gaze moves over my body once again before he turns and closes the door behind him, shutting out the chilly autumn air.

Gooseflesh breaks out over my bare skin and I suppress a shiver.

"This office has been empty since my partner—" His voice cracks. Clearing his throat, he continues, "My partner used to occupy this office and I'd come here to talk out tough cases."

Definitely not what I was expecting...

When it becomes clear he's not going to make a move despite his reputation as a womanizer and a flirt, I toe off my heels and move toward the large closet that covers one wall. It's full of practical, necessary things like a massive filing cabinet and thick books on hallmark cases. Behind a slim door to the right is an extra set of clothes.

"You're talking about Grant Walton."

It's not a question. I learned early that if you ask a question, they'll assume you're stupid.

"Mmm."

I can feel Mr. Sharpe's eyes between my shoulder blades as I take out a simple dark gray dress with a square cut neckline. The sound of the zipper in the otherwise quiet room is exceptionally loud.

As I step into the dress, I can hear the humor in Sharpe's voice.

"Of course you know about Grant. I'm assuming you're interested in becoming his replacement?"

There's a bitterness to that question. Isn't that what Sharpe should want? Another partner to take on half the job of running this firm? I pull the zipper as high as I can, and glance over my shoulder.

"I doubt anyone could replace Grant Walton."

The man's name carries a heavy weight. Decades of not only winning his cases but doing amazing work for those in need. The vulnerable. Grant Walton is a saint, and I'll never understand his decision to join Chris Sharpe's firm when he shut down his own a decade ago.

Sharpe's features settle into a look of satisfaction. He was probably expecting me to pitch him on why he should make me partner, but I didn't wait all these years to come in here looking like an eager law school graduate.

As I turn, he starts to walk toward me.

It's unexpected enough that I pause and take him in. This is the first time I'm getting a *good* look at Chris Sharpe. I've only seen glimpses of him around the office since I started this past Monday.

He's handsome in the kind of way that makes your knees weak. It's not *in your face* handsome or *male model born with perfect bone structure* handsome, but the kind of handsome that comes from a confident man.

As I take in his dark eyes, bowed upper lip, straight nose, and perfectly tailored suit, a thought suddenly enters my mind:

Chris Sharpe is a man who knows how to make women beg.

Red flags and sirens go off in my brain as I blink and take a step back. Mr. Sharpe comes in close enough for the scent of his cologne to make my muscles go slack. He lifts one arm to box me in against the closet.

“Turn around.”

A pulse throbs insistently between my legs at the command. It takes a second for my brain to catch up and make sense of the situation as he says, “Zipper.”

Turning slowly, I push my short auburn hair behind one ear and stand perfectly still. His fingers ghost up my spine and catch the little metal tab, smoothly pulling it all the way up.

Then he steps away and I can breathe again.

You’re Autumn Cavendish. Act like it.

My shoulders straighten at the reminder, and facing Chris Sharpe again, a cold surge washes over me.

“You’re right. I want partner.”

Sharpe’s face goes blank. Then he laughs and my body buzzes with confusion.

I knew the man was dangerous, but this isn’t how I planned things would go. Years of researching him and his firm made me sure I knew what, and who, I was walking into.

The last thing I expected was to have such a visceral reaction to being around him.

“You said yourself, it’ll be damn hard to fill Grant Walton’s shoes. But I look forward to seeing what you can do for me, *Miss...Cavendish.*”

When I don’t correct his assumption that I’m unmarried, that slow smirk comes back.

Dimples. Ugh.

Without another word, Sharpe lets himself out of *my* office and disappears down the hall.

One...two...three...four...

I manage to hold my composure together enough to flick the switch on the remote that controls the window shades so they open once again. Then I drop back against my desk, hands shaking.

“Damn you, Chris Sharpe.” The words come out as an angry growl.

For the last decade, I’ve worked my ass off to get here—working for the man I hate more than anyone else in the world. College, law school, and

internships where I got to the office first and left last. The cat and mouse games with other interns, going against everything in me to get *here*.

Senior associate at Sharpe Law. A shot at partner. The chance to take him down.

“At least I have his attention now,” I mutter. But that doesn’t make me feel better about *how* I got his attention.

Especially since he saw the one thing I do just for me. The lingerie.

Being a woman in this world is hard enough, but in law, I’ve learned that adding a masculine edge to my persona gets me further. I’m taken more seriously. I’m thought of as competent.

But...it isn’t me.

Not really.

Memories flicker through my mind. A pink flannel-patterned dress my mom made me for first grade, my first pair of socks with lace at the ankles, chunky, stylish heels I saw in the mall and knew I’d never be able to afford. Floral perfumes, pearl earrings, pink lipsticks.

I’ve denied myself everything that would come across as too feminine, too weak.

Except for my lingerie.

That’s just for me.

Or at least, it was until Christopher Sharpe laid eyes on me today. Now he’s seen me almost completely bare, literally and figuratively.

I’ll just have to work harder to make him believe that, like him, I’m ruthless. Cold. Competent.

A force to be reckoned with in the courts.

And if he believes it and makes me partner, I’ll be able to destroy him from the inside out.

TWELVE YEARS AGO, Chris Sharpe took away the one person in the world who matters most to me—my brother.

I’ll do anything it takes to get revenge.

Chapter 2

Chris

Sitting in the car, in the dark, it's as if I've summoned her. In my mind, Autumn Cavendish cocks out that hip again as the garter belt hugs her voluptuous waist. Pink lace barely hides her nipples from view and those heels make muscles and curves stand out deliciously...

Then a light flicks on outside and floods the car. My lascivious thoughts fizzle out as I blink in surprise.

The front door of the little town house opens. Mel stands inside with Milo on her hip, squinting out into the foggy Cambridge night.

"Chris?"

Grabbing the lemon pie in the passenger seat, I get out and hurry up to give her a kiss on the cheek. "Hey. Sorry. Just got stuck in my head for a minute."

She hums in understanding but watches me closely as I go about removing my jacket and making a face at Milo, who laughs. Mel moves to take the pie and I wave her off.

"No, you've got your hands full—I'll just put this in the kitchen."

It takes a moment to remember my way around. I've only been up to Cambridge twice since Mel and Jenson bought the town house, wanting to get out of the busy part of Boston and somewhere quieter now that Milo is over a year old. The house is filled with beautiful pools of amber light, dark

wood, and blankets strewn on the couch.

It feels like a home.

So very different from my own place just outside of New York.

“Was work okay today?” Mel hovers close by, her brows knit.

“Yeah, it was fine. Why?”

“I don’t know, you seem...distracted.”

I fight back a blush. If only she knew just what, or *who*, had me so distracted. I definitely don’t need my sister-in-law delving into my fantasies.

“I haven’t been sleeping great with the construction going on at the neighbor’s house.”

Mel makes a face. “That’s still happening? How long can it possibly take to put in a pool?”

We chat and gossip, settling into the kitchen as Jenson comes down the stairs. He sees me and does a double take.

Am I really *that* off?

“Hey, little brother.”

Jenson rolls his eyes at my smirk. It’s been about a year since Nate and I discovered that our dad, who left when we were teenagers, had another family, including Jenson. Despite our being adults, I like reminding him that I’ve got a few years on him.

“How’s the hunt for partner going? Your law school buddies get over you breaking the rules yet?”

Mel grins. Like me, she loves to stir up trouble here and there where she can. She and Jenson were best friends as kids, dated in high school, and then lost each other for more than a decade. Mel didn’t come from this affluent life that we three brothers created for ourselves, and I love that. She’s so much more fun than the other wealthy snobs we know.

“Apparently not. But I’ve never had much faith in picking a partner the way they handle it now. Just because someone has worked for a company or been in a position for years doesn’t mean they’d be the best fit.”

Jenson nods in approval. He has his own history working with assholes at his data analytics company.

Milo sighs and snuggles into his mom’s shoulder. From the mess of food still on the high chair, it’s obvious he ate earlier. “So how exactly *are* you going to pick someone?” Mel whispers over her dozing baby.

I shrug. “It’ll be someone internal, that hasn’t changed. But I don’t care how long they’ve been at Sharpe Law. I just want them to prove themselves.

Show me why they deserve it, and what they can change in the legal world. Too many lawyers these days are concerned with making a ton of money.”

The truth is, late at night, I worry that’s the exact reason so many of my associates have come to work for me. Sharpe Law is one of the top legal firms in New York City. We make money. But that’s not why I started doing this, and it’s not what I want the focus of my company to be.

Marty, for example. She’s been with the firm for almost a decade now, and traditionally, she’d be the logical choice for replacing Grant.

But when Grant came on, he didn’t care about the money. He just wanted to do what was right. My old mentor is only a few hours away now in South Carolina, but I miss him—and his advice—like hell. Which is part of why I was lingering in his office earlier today...

So it’s partly his fault my obsession with Autumn Cavendish has only deepened.

Mel puts Milo down for bed and Jenson and I share a pre-dinner drink. Once we’re tucked in around the table gorging on fried rice and catching up, I let my brain sit on autopilot and try to work out the conundrum I find myself in.

Autumn.

I didn’t even know that was her name until I heard Marty make a scathing remark about her hair, which I just happen to love. The severe chin-length bob makes her auburn hair swing and catch the light beautifully. It makes her eyes look even more fiery.

Especially today, when we were face to face in Grant’s—*her*—office.

Seeing her in that lingerie would’ve been enough to make me obsessed if I wasn’t already.

The first glimpse I got of her was earlier this week. I happened to walk by one of the conference rooms and saw her leading her new team, a mash-up of Grant’s previous team and some new interns.

What caught my attention wasn’t just her obvious beauty, but the way she held herself. I could tell, even through the glass, she was actually listening intently to the person who was speaking. There was no hint of ego or self-importance. No looking down on those in the room with her.

When I glanced at the others, they looked just as surprised as I was in that moment. And happily so, probably. When Grant retired, everyone was terrified of which senior associate would take over his cases.

I can’t claim a hand in hiring Autumn. That was all HR. But all week I

found myself in her orbit, like gravity was pulling us together.

She was just around every corner.

I could practically feel her striding down the halls.

And her scent...sweet. Vanilla. Warm.

I'd eat her if I could. Having her in my mouth isn't off the table yet, except...

I've never felt this way about a woman before. Which is why every time I've almost run into her this week, I dipped around a corner, shut myself in my office, and once even ended up in a supply closet. All to avoid her.

Or rather, my obsession with her.

Mel clears the table, Jenson checks on Milo, who seems to be a bit fussy, and I grab the pie and begin cutting into it. Right away, I zone out. When she comes back into the room, Mel calls me out on it.

"What is up with you tonight, Chris? You're clearly somewhere else."

My eyes snap up to her.

"Oh. Just...reminiscing."

Which isn't exactly untrue. Jenson comes back into the room, and from the curious look on his face, he overheard our short conversation.

"About what?"

I dish out slices of pie, letting my lips lift into a grin. "You really want to know?"

Mel rolls her eyes and Jenson prompts me.

"Alright. I was thinking about my high school girlfriend, Flora."

That catches their attention. Probably because they were high school sweethearts. Mel leans in eagerly, wanting to hear more.

"That's a pretty name. Did you run into her recently, or..."

"No. Just...someone who reminded me of her."

Is that it? Is that why I'm so focused on Autumn? Flora was petite with black hair and caramel eyes. Autumn is definitely not petite. She's all curves, hips, and a lush mouth that she pouts in disapproval—and Flora was almost meek. Autumn has a presence to her.

When the pair press for more information, I fill them in quickly on the background, some of which Jenson already knows. We've had a year of catching up, but there's still so much we don't know about each other as half brothers.

"I asked Flora out when we were sophomores. She was cute and we were both in film club. The second I saw her, I thought I was going to marry her,

but when we graduated, I got into law school in California.”

Mel tilts her head in confusion, and I admit the disappointing part of this story. “I hadn’t told her I applied. Flora got into Brown. She wanted to be an anthropologist. But you know, Nate and I didn’t grow up with money, and I got an almost full ride in California. So...I had to do what was right for Mom and Nate. I needed to get my degree as quickly and cheaply as I could. Flora was mad, understandably, and we didn’t last through the summer. In August, I flew out to California. When I came back home, she was gone.”

I shrug off the past as Mel stares at me with empathy and Jenson sighs. If anyone in this room gets it, it’s him. He has a similar story—needing to support *his* mom after our dad passed, who hadn’t done much to set the family up for success.

“So if someone in your life reminds you of Flora...does that mean you’re going to stop being a playboy?”

Rolling my eyes, I answer Mel. “Not if I can help it. I’m not a lovesick teenager anymore, Mel, but seeing someone who reminds you of your past always makes you think. You know?”

Jenson and Mel share a look across the table.

“This is just...odd for you, Chris. You seem very serious and in your head tonight.” Jenson sounds genuinely worried, and I blink in surprise.

Time to turn the conversation.

The last thing I need is for these two to figure out that I’m lusting after one of my senior associates at the firm. It’s too similar to their story, and not everyone gets a happily ever after just because they’re hooking up with someone they work with.

“It’s more about picking a new partner,” I insist coolly. “A lot of inner fighting, you know? I’m not looking forward to the next twelve months of being distracted by every senior associate’s peacocking around the office.”

Jenson chimes in with his own story about a colleague who made an ass of himself, and pretty soon, we’re all laughing and chatting again. As the night winds down, I find myself more relaxed—but only because they haven’t figured me out.

I can’t stop thinking about Autumn. She’s on repeat in my head, and not just her stripping down to those little pink undergarments.

Every glimpse or glance I’ve gotten of her around the office; every breathtaking moment where I had to duck into the shadows.

Only now, we’ve come face to face. And I can’t avoid her any longer.

I'll have to step into the light.

It's almost eleven by the time Jenson and I trade a gruff hug and Mel walks me out. She leans in the doorway, the oversized sweater she's wearing swallowing her whole—in a charming way.

“Hey,” she calls softly. I turn back. “Maybe with all this stress piling up, you'll remember what's *really* important. It wouldn't be so bad for you to focus on your relationships outside of work, Chris.”

She narrows her eyes in a half-joking manner before waving and closing the door gently.

Apprehension tightens my chest at the thought.

If I'm not focused entirely on work, what else do I have?

As I drive home to a darkened house, I realize the answer is—nothing.

And I'll just have to lie in the empty bed I've made.

Chapter 3

Autumn

Rush hour on Friday keeps me from getting home until six thirty at night. As soon as I reach the apartment door, I can hear Frank whining on the other side; he's probably been waiting for at least an hour now.

"I'm so sorry, baby," I gush as I turn the key, push the door open, and practically spill inside. I end up on the floor with Frank in my lap, his lean mutt body wiggling as he licks my face.

"Autumn," Orla, my roommate, deadpans. I look up through the licking and see her standing with her hands on her hips. "Did you just rip your pants? Again?"

"Oh God."

Laughing, I push Frank off me and stand to inspect the high-waisted black trousers that show off my surprisingly trim ankles and the polished heels I'm wearing.

"Yup." A tear right along the meatiest part of my hip. "Any chance you feel like repairing them sometime tonight?"

I give her my biggest puppy dog eyes, bending to hug Frank and include his happy little face in the begging.

She rolls her eyes, but the smile that appears before she turns gives her away. "You're lucky I'm good with a sewing machine," she calls as she disappears into our little galley kitchen.

The apartment isn't big by any means. It's at basement level, with a walk-out garden in back. But I loved the character of it right from the start. Orla and I have lived here for two years. I'll probably stay longer, if I can help it, because not many apartments in NYC allow dogs Frank's size.

My mutt shadows me through the apartment as I head to my room, his tail thumping against the couch and rapping against the coffee table. "Careful, love." I chuckle, giving his wiry head a rub.

As soon as I strip off my clothes and pull on a floral-patterned sweatshirt, Orla appears in the doorway with a bag of popcorn. She drops onto my bed and cuddles up to Frank, who sneaks a treat from her fingers.

"Alright," she says, leaning back and crunching on her snack, "your first week is officially over. Tell me everything."

Joining her on the bed, I sink against a pillow and feel the exhaustion of the past week settle over me. I'm bone-tired and could probably pass out right now if it weren't for my stomach growling.

"Is he still a complete asshole?" Orla asks, passing me the bag. "Is Marty still lording over everyone? Do they still have those stupid remote control shades on the doors and walls —"

"Hey, those window blinds saved my life."

I chew and swallow a handful of popcorn, take a deep breath, and tell her all about my run-in with Chris Sharpe.

Orla was my "in" at Sharpe Law when I applied two months ago. The hiring process was a long and rigorous one, which wasn't surprising. When Orla started law school a decade ago, she ended up interning at the firm for two years. But she never graduated, deciding instead to drop out and run her own business. She's now a decently successful tailor and seamstress, which is great for me since I regularly rip pants, skirts, and blouses with my thick curves.

She also fully supports my revenge plot of bringing Sharpe down from the inside out. In fact, sometimes I think she's a little *too* zealous. The day of my first interview, she suggested I just poison his coffee.

"I'm sorry—what?"

She's staring at me blankly as I continue to munch on popcorn, musing over my feelings about the past week.

The thing is...I didn't hate the way Chris Sharpe looked at me.

But that's not something I can ever admit out loud, especially to my close friend and accomplice.

“He didn’t try anything, though.”

Orla snorts. “Yeah, not *yet*. Trust me, Autumn, he’s a dog, like all men. One of the worst. I’m not kidding when I say he’s never actually dated.”

What she means is, Chris Sharpe has never been in a relationship. At least, not as far as the media has reported. He’s taken dates to work and public events, sure, but that’s it—the women are mysteriously only ever seen on one outing.

Although, I have to hand it to him, he’s a man of varied taste, which you don’t often see these days. Most men want to be seen out and about with chic models who are never photographed putting food in their mouths. If they’re into women like me—the inspiration for the saying *thick thighs save lives*—they keep that on the down-low.

“Well, I’m not exactly planning on being half naked in front of him again.”

Orla leans back, her eyes narrowing as she scratches Frank’s big head. He’s snuffling away at the crumbs on my comforter. I have to do laundry tonight, anyway.

“Or...”

“Or what? I don’t like that look in your eyes, Orla.”

“Or what if this is your *in*.”

“I’m already *in*! Remember, you coached me through the entire interview process? You had to bribe that guy in HR who slept with your mom at your brother’s wedding?”

She nods sharply, but that scheming look doesn’t go away.

“I thought when you told me he was a womanizer it was a warning against things like this.” My spine is stiff and my hands clutch the bag. I’m remembering Chris’s dark eyes moving over my pink-clad curves.

When was the last time a man looked at me like that?

Too long, says the little voice in my head. Pushing down the urges I’ve been ignoring for months, if not years, I add, “I don’t like the idea of using sex for anything, Orla. And we both know he cuts women loose as soon as they’re out of his bed.”

“True,” she agrees. “But...he’s never met *you*.”

I scrunch up my nose and laugh. “I’m not that special.”

“Hmm. That’s your problem.” Orla’s gaze goes from devious to empathetic. It makes something inside of me curl up and hide away; I hate the feeling of being pitied. “I get why you don’t trust men, babe, and I’m not

saying you need to trust him. But if he saw you in those scrappy pieces of lace you call underwear, trust me, the last thing he'll be thinking about is cutting you loose."

She stands, gives Frank one more rub on the head, and leaves me alone to my moping. I curl my knees up to my chest. Frank huffs and puts his chin on his paws in a mirror image.

"Don't give me that look."

If Frank knew what Orla was suggesting, he'd be as disgusted as I am.

It isn't just the thought of sleeping with Chris Sharpe, the man who's been my enemy since day one.

As much as I don't want to think about it, memories spill in. Toxic relationships from my past, few and far between, but enough. The shouting, the anger, the raised hands. One ex in particular comes to mind, his eyes pure *evil*. I push thoughts of him away, stand, and shake off the past.

"No way," I say out loud to Frank and to myself. "I don't care if he wants me. I'm not letting a man like Chris Sharpe have me."

Chapter 4

Chris

Monday—the day Marty likes to remind me exactly what I could have if I would only give in.

Every Monday at 9 a.m., I have the associates gather in one of the conference rooms to update me on the cases they're working. Marty loves making a show of it, and she's going full speed today with a presentation that requires her to stand on her toes to point to the screen. Completely unnecessary, but it's probably serving its purpose since her skirt rides up high, just under her ass.

Don't get me wrong, Marty is an attractive woman. Close to my age, her youthful face is marred only by frown lines and too much lipstick. She keeps her long hair down, defying the gender stereotype. Many people think that women in the professional workplace should keep their hair up, as it gives them more authority.

I disagree. What gives them more authority is doing their job well.

"Can we cut to the chase, Marty? You laid down the groundwork for this case last week, so you can move ahead."

My words are direct, but not cruel. Maybe they should've been, because Marty gives me a flirty smile and smoldering look.

"Anything for you, Mr. Sharpe."

Internally, I'm cringing. It's so obvious what she's doing, and as I glance

down the table, I see Autumn roll her eyes.

That's when the lightbulb goes off...could Autumn be jealous of Marty?

My eyes rove back and forth between the two as Marty, the last associate to present this morning, wraps up.

They're two *very* different women. For starters, Autumn's presentation was short and sweet. She told me only what I needed to know and what she had planned this week. She recognized other associates and interns on her team for their accomplishments. Then she shut up and sat down.

Today she's wearing a high-neck burgundy shirt that draws attention away from her ample chest. Smart move, since two of the male interns on her team are clearly head over heels for her.

They watch her with puppy dog eyes, completely ignoring Marty. I lean back in the chair and try to suppress a smirk. Can't blame them. They have good taste.

"Thank you, everyone. You're dismissed. Ted—stop by my office later and we can go through that deposition together. I think you're right and there's something more there."

The group of about thirty people begins to file out. Autumn flashes Marty another glare. I kick my heels up on the adjacent chair and watch, amused and curious.



MARTY CAN'T LET GO; she's like a dog with a bone.

Heading back from the weekly financial meeting, she catches me on the main floor. Not a great place for situations like this when she presses herself in close, nothing but a take-out bag separating us.

"Mr. Sharpe, I took this off Joshua's hands for you."

She purrs, arching her back to press her breasts up against the low-cut top she's wearing. I can feel eyes on us and start to get annoyed, hot anger racing through my veins.

That's when I look up and see Autumn.

Her face is turned toward us, but she's bent over a desk, explaining something to an eager group of legal assistants. She rolls her eyes again before focusing back on the task at hand. The position brings attention to her waist and her taut calves, and my brain conjures up the image of her in my

bedroom in a similar position...

“That’s not mine,” I snap, unable to look away from Autumn as I push past Marty. She stumbles back in surprise.

The logical part of my mind has been pushed far back in a corner. Instinct has taken over, and I’m too focused on what I want.

Her.

“Miss Cavendish.”

She straightens in surprise, the silk of her blouse settling beautifully around her curves.

Her eyes dart over my shoulder to where Marty is inevitably watching. There are still eyes on me, on *us*, but I don’t care. I’d let everyone watch if it meant I got to be close to her.

“Um...wasn’t that your lunch?”

Autumn’s tone is dry, annoyed. A corner of my mouth lifts.

So she *is* jealous.

“No,” I lie, feeling no remorse about leaving the risotto in Marty’s hands. She can pour it all over her naked body for all I care; I only have eyes for Autumn.

Her green eyes dart to the side and the legal aides cough and shuffle and go back to their desks. Autumn crosses her arms.

“Can I help you with something?”

It’s an echo of the question she asked me a week ago, when I caught a tantalizing glimpse of her in Grant’s old office...

“Have lunch with me.”

A few heads turn, conversations ending in shocked stutters. I get it, this isn’t something I do.

Ever.

Confusion flits across Autumn’s face, but she masks it quickly. A habit that makes her a good lawyer. My smile only widens to a wolfish grin.

“If I’m not mistaken, Marty was offering *you* lunch.”

She makes it sound like a dirty word and my cock twitches with interest. Gaze dropping to her plump lips, I wonder what other dirty words I could make her cry out.

My voice drops, aware of our audience, as I answer, “Marty just wants to fuck her way up the ladder. I’m not interested.”

Autumn’s brows knit as her gaze runs over me appraisingly. I’m not completely clueless. I know she doesn’t trust me, has some preexisting

dislike for me, for some reason. Whenever she spies me on the floor, I see that little sneer she can't hide.

I want to know what I did to make her dislike me. I want to fix it; I want to beg at her feet if that's what it takes.

I want to make *her* beg.

"No."

Autumn turns and walks away.

Following her, I'm only dimly aware this isn't a good look for the firm. Their leader wandering around after an attractive woman, wounded and half in love.

Half? the little voice in my head taunts.

"Autumn—"

She turns quickly. I barely pull to a stop, the distance between us minuscule.

That scent is back again. Vanilla with a hint of something floral...

Something warm...

I want to bury myself in her. Let my senses soak her in.

"What are you doing?"

Her voice is hard, unforgiving. It's like a slap in the face.

It brings me back to myself.

What *am* I doing? I started this firm on my own at twenty-seven. What the hell am I doing a decade later, ready to lose it all for a woman I don't even know?

I don't have an answer.

This firm is mine, and I've run it flawlessly for years. Coldly. I know what they all say about me, because it's what I want them to think about me. Each day I wake up and put on this expressionless mask. The headlines, when I do things right, read: *ruthless. Unmoving. No mercy.*

"I apologize." Now that I've snapped back to reality, I'm blinking away my fantasies of the woman in front of me. She's gorgeous, flawless, and something draws me to her.

Why am I not afraid of that? I know from my line of work that it takes just one mistake to lose everything. I can't afford to make an error, not with my new extended family.

"Do you normally take associates out to lunch?" she asks, genuine confusion tinging her voice.

No, I almost answer. I almost tell her the truth. I *want* to tell her the truth,

but I don't know why.

"Only the ones I don't know well," I lie smoothly. "The last time we spoke, you expressed your interest in the position of partner." I appraise her coldly, wanting to drive the point home—you're *nothing to me, just a prospect*. "I'm sure you can understand I'd need to know and trust the person I choose for the position."

Her pretty features flicker with surprise and panic. Autumn inhales a small gasp, and for a crazy moment, I think she just might take me up on my offer for lunch.

Then she presses her mouth into a line.

"I'm sorry. I misunderstood."

But if everyone else's reactions are anything to go by, Miss Cavendish definitely did not misunderstand. I haven't been doing a good job of hiding my interest in her, and guilt sneaks through the pounding walls of my heart.

"I pride myself on my work," she continues, both of us ignoring the hint of desperation in her voice. "I have no doubt I'll prove to you that I'd make an excellent partner."

It's a confusing sell, half-hearted, maybe because she's caught off guard. We're left in an awkward silence. Then Autumn seems to realize we're still mere inches away from each other.

She steps back, wobbling on a heel.

Instinctively, I reach out and catch her with a hand around her waist.

The silk does nothing to hide the pillowy feel of her skin, and it's as if I've touched a live wire. Electricity runs through my body. I stiffen, and Autumn practically pries my hand off her, regaining her balance to step away.

My lips part as I try to force out an apology. But I'm still stunned by the feel of her in my hands.

Unthinkingly, I say, "I don't know what to make of you, Autumn. I can't read you like I read everyone else."

Her eyes darken as she looks away. Something about what I said hit a nerve, though I have no idea what she found offensive in my declaration.

"Maybe you're not as good a judge of character as you like to think."

"Oh, I am. I knew the second I saw my sister-in-law that —"

I stutter on my words, mouth open.

Autumn looks at me curiously, head cocked to the side, hair grazing her jaw.

Is she going to ask for more information? I don't talk about my private life with anyone at Sharpe Law, and suddenly a void of vulnerability opens up inside of me. Everything is screaming *run*, but before I can, Autumn is the one who takes another step back.

"Well, again, I'm sorry for the misunderstanding." Her arms come up to wrap around her ribs. A nervous habit, maybe, since this is the second time she's done it in my presence now.

Nodding curtly, I turn and blindly walk back the way I came. Luckily, the elevators are on this side of the main floor, and I won't have to do some kind of walk of shame through the crowd of employees who are probably trying to figure out what the hell is going on with their boss.

I've clearly lost my mind.

But what's worrying me more is, it feels like my heart is falling, too.

Chapter 5

Autumn

I don't bother looking up as I frantically text Orla, asking her if she fed Frank and can take him out one last time.

It's just after 7 p.m. Everyone has gone home, and the cleaning crew is already wrapping things up. The building, like most buildings in New York, isn't dark. But it's quiet and the emptiness is unsettling.

What I wouldn't give to just have Frank here with me. For company, but also because I feel horrible. Two weeks working at Sharpe Law and I've barely had time for my poor pup. I'll definitely need to spoil him sometime soon.

The blue glow of my cell lights the hallway as I hurry down it, away from the receptionist area where the paperwork I require was finally faxed after an entire day of not receiving it. It's literally the *last* thing I need to get this case rolling—one of the cases that will prove to Chris Sharpe that I deserve the position of partner.

One of the cases that will get me where I must be to take him down.

I turn the corner into my office and in the dim light, it's almost like I can see him there all over again. Dark hair, dark eyes, that dimpled smirk.

A shiver runs down my spine as confusion clouds my mind.

What the hell am I thinking?

Why can't I get him out of my head?

I shouldn't be fantasizing about the way he walked toward me that day... about the way my body seemed pulled toward him.

In a rush, I go to my desk and gather everything. Tote, phone, keys, lightweight Walker coat. My heels echo as I stride down the hallway.

But there's a glow that catches my attention. I can see it through the glass panes of the conference room, on the other side of the building. Chris Sharpe's office light.

Breath caught in my throat, it takes a second to realize my heart is pounding. Why am I so nervous?

Because you're alone in the building with the man who put your brother in prison, the voice in my head warns. But it's weak. That isn't really the reason.

Like a moth to a flame, I walk the hall around the edge of the conference room and pause. What am I doing? I should just go home.

The light turns off and sends a little jolt of reality through me.

Before I can turn around, he prowls from his office—looking every inch an imposing beast.

I want to hate everything about him. Instead, my eyes drag slowly down his body, taking in Chris Sharpe—a legend right in front of me.

And I get to see him undone.

His dark hair is ruffled, untamed, as if he's been running a hand through it. He looks tired and serious. The buttons of his shirt are undone, farther down than is really acceptable, and my gaze drops to the exposed skin and sprinkle of chest hair.

Blood races through my veins as we stare at each other.

"You're here late." His voice is gruff, as if he hasn't spoken in a while. He doesn't blink as he walks toward me—although it's more like a stalk.

"I was waiting on some paperwork," I murmur in response, taking an automatic step back.

Chris looks down at the tote handles I'm clutching, the jacket draped over my arm.

"That's not going to be enough to keep you warm."

The statement comes out as a purr, and it sends a shiver down my spine. *What would you do to keep me warm?* It's a thought that sends a shot of betrayal through me, but I'm intrigued.

"Let me drive you home."

The thought of being even closer to Chris, in his car, an enclosed area

where we'd truly be alone...

"No, thank you."

His eyes narrow. "How do you get here every day? How do you get home?"

"The subway."

He looks briefly surprised. But surely he must realize that not all of his employees can afford a car and parking in New York?

After a pause, he licks his lips and repeats, "Just tonight. Let me drive you home. It's cold out."

I look out the window, which isn't helpful. We're above the tops of the trees lining the street. I know he's right, though, because fall has really settled in and cold wind rattles through the streets. If I take the subway, I'll be running two blocks in heels, in the dark. What would Orla say?

What if this is your in?

It's like she's standing right next to me, only this time, it doesn't seem like such a ludicrous idea...not with the way Chris's dark eyes are watching me.

His hands, closed into fists, flex. The tendons standing out do something to me, send a rush of a warm twist to my core.

"Okay. Just tonight."

Is this a dream or a nightmare? Chris nods and gestures for me to lead the way to the elevators. I can feel him close behind me, hyperaware of his body as he follows me into the small space.

The scent of his expensive cologne has me breathing deeply, wanting more of it.

"Here," he says, reaching out. "Let me." His hand wraps lightly around my forearm, caresses down, over my wrist and hand...and then he carefully plucks my purse away.

My pulse pounds in my ears, warnings going off. I blink rapidly and try to stick with logic. Chris wouldn't try anything, not here. He wouldn't hurt me. That's an old fear that's on me; Sharpe might be a billionaire asshole, and my boss, but he'd never physically hurt me.

The doors open and we both step out into the main lobby, Chris leading the way to the doors that go to a small parking garage. Just another example of how endlessly wealthy he is—the firm has its own garage, a luxury in the city.

"This way."

I follow his broad shoulders, the overhead lights dim and dragging shadows over his body. An excited shiver goes through me at the thought of a fast car ride home with him, but I push it away.

If I'm going to do this, I need to have control.

We stop next to a forest green Rivian SUV. Who knew Chris Sharpe, big shot city lawyer, was environmentally conscious? He opens the passenger side door for me and I slip in, all too aware of how high the skirt rides up on my legs.

He bends to put the bag at my feet, looking up with those dark eyes. My breath catches. Part of me longs for his hand to drag up my calf, delve under my skirt...

Control. Be in control.

Chris pulls back, a smug look flitting across his face before he closes the door firmly and goes around to the other side.

Once he's in, he's all business. Seat belt fastened, car on, lights on, pulling smoothly out of the spot reserved just for him. I start to relax back into my seat. It's definitely warmer in here...or is that just the anticipation of what I plan on doing before the night is over?

There's just one problem. I don't live *too* far away from the firm. Less than a ten-minute drive, at least, so I direct him in the general direction and then —

"Here. Turn in here."

He looks at me sharply. Because I'm indicating a small, dark park with a cramped parking area.

"You don't...?"

He wants to know if I live in the trashy brick apartments bordering each side of the park. I shake my head.

Then I reach over and slide a hand onto his thigh.

Through the fabric of his trousers, muscles tense.

"Autumn."

His voice is low, a warning. But even in the dark, I can tell his eyes have narrowed. I have to act fast so he doesn't ask questions; just earlier today I rebuffed him. He must be wondering why I'm suddenly making a move.

"I don't like to mix pleasure and work," I explain casually, starting to carefully pull my body into a kneeling position on the seat. "And I wouldn't want everyone at work to know just how wet you make me."

Internally, I roll my eyes. How many times have I boosted a man's ego

like this, just to get it over with? My hand wanders north, but before it can get to its destination, Chris reaches out and circles my wrist with his large fingers.

I look up in surprise.

His expression is dead serious. Stern, even.

“This isn’t a game.”

Frowning, I’m not sure how to respond. Based on what I know about Chris, I’d assume this *was* a game. He’s a notorious love-em-and-leave-em kind of guy, never seen with the same woman twice.

“I know,” I say quietly, pulling my hand back.

He doesn’t yank me closer, scowl, or start yelling. Relief washes over me as his shoulders go slack. It’s quiet in the car, the sound of the two of us breathing oddly calming. Outside, the park is empty except for a lone figure walking across it. This area is residential, but the lot we’re parked in is far enough away from the apartments that no one can see us. Trees tower over the car, blocking the silver light of the moon.

Unexpectedly, Chris reaches out a hand.

“Come here.”

“Wha-?”

With his other hand, he pulls a lever beneath his seat and it slides back smoothly. “Come here.”

It’s the perfect balance of cool and commanding. Without thinking, I start climbing over the seat and into his lap.

The position is precarious, but luckily, the skirt I’m wearing—wine red—is heavily pleated. It lifts and spreads around my thighs as I straddle Chris’s lap, the graze of his fingers on my bare inner thighs making my nipples tighten and peak.

The small space of the driver’s seat crushes us together. My breasts are in his face, and Chris’s eyelids drop heavily as he hums his approval. He buries his face in my tits, one hand moving to my ass and squeezing.

I’m wet immediately.

A surprised, delighted squeak slips out and Chris chuckles against my skin.

“Good girl. I want to know what you like.”

Another gush of damp heat at his words. Squirming, I try to figure out where to put my hands to brace myself. The back of the seat? No. His shoulders? The angle is wrong.

I settle on *his* chest, feeling his muscles bunch and contract as he uses both hands now to massage my ass slowly, kissing his way up from my chest to my throat.

Something throbs against my leg and I realize...he's hard. There's nothing but the fabric of his trousers and my panties between us, and both might as well be nonexistent with how well I can feel the outline of his erection. Unsurprisingly, Chris is the perfect size—not too big, not small. Thick enough to make me lick my lips and pant, canting my hips down to try and grind on him.

“Not yet,” he warns, reaching up to pull the wrapped neckline of my shirt away from my breasts. Deftly, his fingers pull the silk tie and they're released—spilling out into his palms as he leans back and eyes my body.

My thighs are quaking and a hot blush covers my body. I have to close my eyes, unable to look at his face, because I'm *enjoying* this and I shouldn't be.

Maybe that's what makes it feel so good when he moves one hand and slips two fingers inside me.

There's just enough friction to make me moan. Thank God his windows are tinted. I start rocking against him rhythmically, the heel of his hand hitting my clit and sending shockwaves of electricity to my core.

“Just like that,” he murmurs, licking and nibbling at my chest through the lace bra still encasing my tits.

Seconds later, Chris goes still.

I do, too, trying to figure out what he's thinking.

There's no way he suspects that I'm using him—using sex—to get closer to him, right?

Or is he realizing he's not actually attracted to me now that I'm half naked and in his lap? A lot of men *think* they want a thick woman but can't handle her when it comes down to it.

A sliver of insecurity slips in; am I just not his type? Does he really prefer those stick-thin models?

I suck a breath in, afraid to ask but wanting to know when he says, “I don't take chances like this, Autumn. Ever. I need you to know that.”

His dark eyes pin me in place. Through the haze of lust, it takes a second to catch his meaning. I frown; isn't this kind of his *thing*? Orla said he was all about hookups.

“Can I trust you?”

The vulnerable edge to his voice is so raw, it almost splits me open with guilt. I stare down at him, completely blanking on how to answer.

Because the truth is, no, Christopher Sharpe can't trust me.

I will do everything in my power to destroy him.

Even if right now, I'm the one who's putty in his hands.

"Yes," I breathe. I reach between us and fumble with his belt for only a second before it's open. He leans up, kisses the spot just under my ear open-mouthed, making me melt.

"Normally, I'd want proof. Birth control, your last test, something like that but—" His voice cracks and now his hands are fumbling between us as he frees his erection from his pants and rubs the head against my soaked silk panties.

The moan he lets out is long and low. It makes my pussy gush again and I whimper, hands roaming his chest, looking for some kind of purchase, wanting *more*.

"Are you ready for me?"

"Yes." This time it comes out as a gasp, and as Chris pushes my thong aside and slips inside of me, it turns to a shudder.

My head drops back.

It's been months since I've had sex, but still. I shouldn't be this desperate for it, not the way I ride Chris's thick cock, his hips pressing up at a bruising pace.

It's just that I've never felt so...*full*. So satisfied. At least not from the first stroke.

Still, this could just be a mix of adrenaline and horniness. I've been so busy the past two weeks with this new job, was so concentrated through the hiring process, I haven't had time to *take care of things* myself.

Chris Sharpe definitely knows how to handle a woman like me. I was wrong about that.

His large hands grip my ass and use that hold to pound me down onto him, pussy grinding against his pelvic bone at the perfect angle. It has me crying out, trying to muffle the sound by biting my lip.

"Fuck," Chris groans, wrapping an arm around my hips and pulling me tighter against him. He has immediate access to my tits like this and yanks the silk bra away, exposing my tight nipples and heavy breasts.

I don't have time to be self-conscious about the stretch marks. He buries his face in my chest again, this time squeezing and massaging at that perfect

almost pain point, driving me closer and closer to —

Oh, God. I'm going to come.

"Good," he grunts, driving up into me with that frustrating smirk, his dark eyes flashing.

I said that out loud?

There's no moment to be wasted on mortification. Chris reaches between us and presses his thumb to my clit.

The orgasm rushes through my body like a wave, receding only to pound back in again and overwhelm my senses. Blood pulses in my veins as every part of me goes tense, milking Chris and riding him until it's too much. Almost painful in how good it feels.

When it's over, I lean back, eyes still closed. The steering wheel cuts uncomfortably into my back. The silk wrap shirt is a mess around my waist, tits still out, bra pulled beneath them.

The sound of our heavy breathing fills the car.

His erection pulses inside me, and it's now I realize I'm not the only one who finished. The warm, wet feeling of cum is unmistakable, coating both our thighs.

It's going to be a bitch to get *that* out of this skirt.

"I hate you."

I don't even realize the words slip out in a whisper.

Chris's hand on my thigh goes still.

This is it. This is when he pushes me away.

I've lost my chance—what use am I to him now?

"I wish I could say the same about you," he says dryly, carefully arranging my skirt to cover my modesty despite our compromising position.

"But I've wanted you from the moment I saw you."

My eyes open.

Chris Sharpe, my boss, is looking at me with a completely open expression. Clearly amused and...maybe a little...sad?

"No one at the office can know about this," I rush out, clumsily trying to slip off his lap without getting bodily fluids everywhere. He helps, lifting me more easily than I expected, and readjusts himself as I glance away.

It's what anyone in this situation would say, right?

Okay...maybe Marty would want everyone to know she's fucking the boss. But not me.

"Of course not." He says it coolly, as if it's common sense, something

we'd already agreed on ahead of time.

I should've made him sign an agreement.

Except that hours ago, I had no idea I'd fully give in to Orla's crazy plan.

And not only that...but I'd enjoy it.

Chris turns his head, that earnest look still on his face. It's doing strange things to my stomach, making it flip and ache all over with guilt.

"Can I take you out?"

His voice is so low that for a second, I think I imagined it.

My lips part.

The word *yes* starts to form —

Because a part of me wants to know if he would really take it further. Be seen out in public with me. A part of me wonders what it would be like to sit across from Chris Sharpe at some fancy restaurant, letting him wine and dine me, both of us knowing I'd end up in his bed no matter what.

And because I want that so badly, my next word comes out resolutely. "No."

If any of that ever happened, I'd never make partner. Chris would never give it to the woman everyone knows he's sleeping with.

My best bet is to keep stringing him along, if I can.

"But maybe next time, you'll treat me like a lady and we won't fuck in a car."

The look on his face, as if I slapped him, has me worried—was that too far?

Then he laughs ruefully, starts the car, and the corner of his mouth quirks up in that grin of his.

"Fair enough. Where do you live, Miss Cavendish?"

I wish the way he said my name didn't make something in me ache.

I wish I could ignore this pull I feel toward him. As much as I want to play the coldhearted lawyer, a small part of me has to admit—I've felt drawn to him, too, from the moment our eyes met.

Chapter 6

Chris

Friday comes and the world is still a haze.

Once, my older brother Nate would've told me that getting a woman out of my system was what mattered. That I might as well get it over with and move on, because there were more important things in life.

Now...I'm not so sure.

Autumn is in my veins. What happened between us in the car did nothing to erase her.

I smell her everywhere, that vanilla scent that makes my mind go blank, and it doesn't matter that when she looks at me her face is expressionless.

No one in the office can know about this.

The way she said it...I don't know why, but it turns my stomach into a nervous knot.

Of course she doesn't want anyone in the office to know about it. I should want the same thing; I should want to keep this private, especially with my strict history of not dipping my pen into the company ink.

Friday night in Central Park is anything but quiet. Couples and families stroll, buskers are out, food vendors are tucked into corners. I find Grant sitting on a bench on a small hilltop.

"Mr. Miyagi?"

He raises one snow-white brow, which contrasts beautifully with the

bright red shirt he has on.

“Very funny, Dr. Faust.”

My smirk only widens at the use of the nickname he gave me years ago. Faust, the man who sold his soul for all the pleasures and knowledge in the world and was still unhappy.

It’s not too far off the mark, although lately it feels like a little flame has been lit within me.

“How was tai chi?”

“Good.” He sounds relaxed and happy as he gazes out across the park. “I’m more agile than I think I was even in my twenties.”

Agility, or lack of it, was part of why Grant decided to retire. In the privacy of his office, he admitted that everything hurt—a stiff back, neck, creaking knees, headaches. It’s the fate I probably have to look forward to in the not so distant future.

As I sit down beside him, not bothering to worry about my creased suit, he asks, “How was the work week? How’s the firm?”

“Good. Everything’s running smooth.”

A part of me longs to tell him how stressed out I’ve been since he left. *More* stressed out than I was before he left, which I never let on about then, either. Grant is like a father figure to me, and I know it was a hard choice for him to retire and leave everything to me. I don’t want him to feel guilty, not when he seems so content.

He gives me a sidelong look.

“So. Who’s the girl, then?”

Affronted, I turn and stare at him. “What?”

“The girl. The one who’s got you brooding.”

“I am *not* brooding.”

That’s something my older brother Nate does. Not me. I’m not a brooder.

“You are definitely brooding. And if everything is going as smoothly as you say, then it can only be a woman.”

I clamp my mouth shut, annoyed, and try to enjoy the golden light of late afternoon. The trees in the park are starting to change colors now, yellow tinged with orange and reds bleeding through.

With a sigh, I sink farther against the bench. Grant has always given expert advice and can read me like a book—part of why he was an excellent lawyer. If anyone can help me dig myself out of this Autumn-centered hole, it’s him.

“Okay. There is someone.”

Grant chuckles. “A girl?”

Not sure why it’s a question, I shoot him a look. “A *woman*. Trust me, I don’t think many men could handle her.”

I’m starting to wonder if *I* can. It’s not just her curves and that sneaky lingerie, but this undercurrent she has—she’s a survivor.

“I’m assuming she’s evading you?”

It’s his polite way of asking if we’ve slept together.

“No, actually.”

Dark scenes from the car flash through my mind. Autumn’s breasts surging out of her bra. Her warm thighs straddling my hips. The endless curves that tempt me like an addiction.

Grant is looking at me dead-on now, a frown creasing his brow. His eyes narrow. He knows as well as anyone that I don’t date the same woman twice, and I *definitely* don’t sleep with them twice.

Then his expression softens. But it does nothing to ease the stiffness in my spine.

“Hmm. It’s about time.”

I don’t like the smug way he says it, and I scowl at him. “And just what does that mean?”

“It means that you were only going to make it so far before you fell hard for someone, Chris. Looks like she’s giving you a run for your money.”

Shifting uncomfortably on the bench, I try to deny it. “I’m not—I haven’t—*fallen* for her, Grant. I just can’t focus with her around.”

Surprise and concern flash in his eyes. “She’s not an employee, is she, Chris?”

There’s a clear tone of disapproval in his voice. He knows I spend ninety percent of my time at work, so there aren’t many other options for where Autumn and I met.

I feel like a little kid caught misbehaving; a dog with its tail tucked between its legs. I can’t lie to him. Never have, don’t want to try, probably never will.

“She is. But no one knows, and no one is going to find out.”

Because I’m not even sure it’ll continue...after the cool way she rebuffed me in the office, I don’t think she’d have any problem saying no again. It was *her* who decided to take things further; she’s in complete control. Is that what has me so attached to her? The feeling of being totally at mercy to someone

else's desires?

"It rarely works out like that," Grant murmurs dryly.

I think back to his own love story with Lenore, a cleaning woman from the firm he worked at before mine. Though he left the company of his own accord, everyone there knew Grant stayed late every day for Lenore. I've never been clear on whether or not anything actually happened between them. She eventually left the country to return to her ailing mother, but I have no idea if that was the catalyst that drove Grant to Sharpe Law.

"Maybe this is a good thing."

"I'm sorry—a good thing?" The concern on his face has cleared, and now *he's* the one brooding.

"I saw your brother last week, he came to install the bookcases I commissioned. He mentioned you haven't been around lately."

Nate. Always tattling on me, even now, when we're both adults.

"I have *two* brothers now, you know. I have to split time between them. Just saw Jenson and Mel last week."

Breathing in the chill fall air, I shoot him a sidelong glance to see if he believes me. Not that it's a lie—I did go see Jenson and Mel. But my mind definitely hasn't been on family lately, which only makes the thorn of guilt dig down deeper.

"Nathan is a perfect example," Grant continues as if I didn't say anything. "Remember how he was consumed with work? How little time he made for anything else, including Eva?"

"It wasn't like that, Grant. It's not like Nate was neglecting her."

"I'm not saying he was. But his priorities weren't in the right place, and he knew that. Not until Genevieve came around." He turns to look at me, and all over again, I can't help wishing I had a dad like Grant, instead of the man who disappeared when I was a teenager.

Maybe I wouldn't be the way I am—ambitious. Stuck. Unhappy.

"Wouldn't it be nice to let your guard down for once, Chris? It sounds like this woman, whoever she is, is getting to your soft heart."

My chest roils with worry.

That's the last thing I want, someone breaching the walls I put up. Grant knows me better than anyone else; he's come to family events and saw me chase Eva around when she was a toddler. He's watched me harass Nate and break tense moments with humor.

"It's been getting hard to keep the balance," I mutter reluctantly. At

home, with family—acting as the goofball. At work, in the city—the coldhearted lawyer persona with a near-perfect track record. “But imagine what would occur if my opponents saw that side of me, Grant. I can’t let it happen.”

We share a somber look. Grant understands what I mean—it would be bad news for clients if the world saw me as *soft*. I wouldn’t be taken seriously, their cases wouldn’t be taken seriously, and the other firms would eat us alive.

Grant sighs heavily, shoulders settling, and suddenly he looks every bit the sixty-five-year-old man he is. Tired and scruffy with a two-day beard and wrinkles in his red tai chi shirt.

He shakes his head.

“I don’t know, Chris. Not to belittle the work we’ve done over the years, but sometimes I wonder...”

Trailing off, Grant stares out across the park. Somewhere, kids are laughing and a woman calls out. Two squirrels skitter up a nearby oak, the leaves a deep orange-brown, acorns littering the ground.

Autumn.

I should stop ignoring the signs she’s been sending me. The sneers, distrustful looks, the avoidance when she sees me coming down the hallway at Sharpe Law.

But she’s everywhere.

I can’t escape her.

Chapter 7

Autumn

Frank trails behind me as I nervously pace the apartment. A used frying pan sits on the stove, my dirty plate in the sink, laundry basket waiting by the door.

Frank still needs a decent walk, too. I have so much to do. But Saturdays are the day Stephen calls me. Until I hear from him, I just can't seem to get anything done.

He has a fund set up that I routinely contribute to so he can afford the calls and ring direct instead of calling collect. I guess I'm paying for it either way. It's a small price to know my brother's okay.

Twelve years and I still worry about how he's doing in prison. The first few months were the toughest as the pecking order was figured out around a new inmate. Luckily, our lower-class upbringing was more than enough to give Stephen a solid foundation in fighting, at least. He can throw a punch and put on a poker face.

The last few years have been quiet. He has a job with the prison library and passes most of his time by working out, reading, and studying marine biology—something that never would've caught his attention on the outside.

My heart aches with anxiety and I press a hand to my chest as Frank whines.

“It's okay, boy.”

He stares me down, not looking very reassured. With a nervous little trot and the nudge of his nose, he herds me toward the couch. I plop down onto it and rub his big head.

Then my cell buzzes.

“Thank God.” Doesn’t matter that it’s been years; some days I still expect the call not to come at all. “Stephen?”

“Hey, sis.”

“You’re late.” The clock over the stove reads a few minutes after 9 a.m. Way past when I should be cleaning up the apartment and getting my clothes to the dry cleaner.

“Yeah, sorry. There was a scuffle in the cafeteria and they made us all wait there.”

“Are you okay?”

“Of course. Just two new guys working it out. How have you been? How’s the new job, now that you’re a few weeks in?”

I relax into the couch at the calm, even tone of his voice. Stephen is eight years older than me. He’s always been my big brother, and even if he’s behind bars, he makes me feel safe.

Which isn’t fair. I’m the one who should be making *him* safe.

It’s a stark reminder of the “new job.” Stephen knows I started at a firm three weeks ago, but he doesn’t know which one. And I don’t plan on telling him.

“It’s good, so far. Not anything I didn’t expect or wasn’t ready for. Competitive.”

“Yeah, well. That’s law for you, right?”

“Mmm. I don’t mind. They have an opening for partner and I’m planning on going for it. Got a year to bust my butt.”

He chuckles, then pauses. In that moment, I realize what I said wrong.

“Wait—doesn’t it take years to make partner?”

Chewing my lip, I automatically pet Frank to keep my heart rate down. I can’t afford to be caught out now, not when I’m this close.

“Yeah, usually. You stick with a place for seven or eight years to prove yourself. But this firm is going about it differently.”

He soaks that in, but doesn’t ask any more questions, which is a relief. If Stephen suspected what I was doing, he’d probably break out of prison just to ream me out. He can throw a punch, but he’s not one for revenge. That’s part of why this whole thing—the crime he was sent to prison for, the false

testimony against him—is so ridiculous. Stephen wouldn't hurt a fly.

It's why I have to do what I'm doing, even if it's souring my heart. I wasn't made for revenge, either, if I'm being honest.

"How's your week been?" I ask, and as Stephen starts talking about a new program he'll have access to, I close my eyes and remember our childhood.

Having an older brother was exactly what I needed. Growing up, I was definitely a fragile kid—a girly girl, crying whenever I scraped my knee or had a nightmare. Being older than me, Stephen was always there to calm me down and give me that comforting big brother hug until I quieted.

When our mom died from cancer, Stephen stepped up and did a lot of the taking care of me. He'd make mac and cheese, play with me outside, or put on my favorite TV shows. I was only four; he was twelve.

Our dad started drinking as soon as Mom went into hospice. I barely remember what he was like outside of a beer-induced haze, zoned out on the front porch or the couch.

So Stephen has been my only family pretty much from the start. Our life wasn't perfect, but we had each other.

At least, until he got arrested for a crime he didn't commit.

Part of me wants to tell him about working for Chris and I have to bite my lip to keep it in.

I've almost got him, I want to say. I'm going to find a way to take down the man who put you away—the man who ignored your insistence that you were innocent.

Chris Sharpe was the prosecutor against Stephen, who could only get a public defender.

When I became a lawyer, I swore to never be as hateful and cold as Chris, or as uncaring and lazy as that public defender.

"Autumn?"

"Oh. What? Sorry, I, uh, Frank distracted me."

"Hmm." Stephen isn't convinced by my off-the-cuff lie. "Are you sure this job is a good idea? You already sound so worn out."

"Pish. You can't tell that over the phone. I'm fine."

"Can too. You're clearly distracted and tired."

"It's Saturday morning! I got up early to knock a bunch of chores off my list —"

A blatant lie as I look around at the messy apartment. Orla is going to kill

me if I don't get this place cleaned up today. She's always pointing out the irony of how messy I am at home to how impeccably put together I am at work.

"Did you ever look into that library job I sent you?"

My heart aches at his attempt to make my life better, even as his is wasted away behind bars.

"Stephen...it's near impossible to get in with the New York Public Library. You need a master's, and I don't have that!"

"I'm sure they'd take a degree in law, Autumn."

He says it teasingly, but it still stings. I decided shortly after Stephen was found guilty that I'd be attending law school. Law definitely was not what I *wanted* to do, but it was something I *had* to do. And I've come to terms with it over the years.

Stephen, on the other hand, insists I should follow my first love—books.

It's a nice idea. But life doesn't always work out the way you want it to.

The little mechanical voice on the phone tells us his time is almost up. We quickly say our goodbyes.

"Give Frank a big hug for me."

Stephen has never met Frank, but I'm sure they'd be totally in love with each other if they did meet.

"I will. Be safe. I'll see you soon, right?"

There's hesitation before he answers, "Yeah. I'll see you soon."

He hates me coming out to the prison. But why wouldn't I, when he's so close? Talking to him on the phone is great but seeing him in person—it helps me believe he's doing okay. As much as he can be, with ten more years to serve.

I hang up, lay back on the couch, and wrap an arm around Frank. He huffs in my ear gently as if making sure I'm okay.

"Soon, boy," I murmur, exhausted from keeping the secret from my brother.

Soon.

Before long, I'll have the opportunity to take down Chris Sharpe—to ensure that everyone questions the validity of every single case he's ever been involved in.

And maybe, just maybe, that'll be enough to spur action to investigate if Stephen really *did* kill that girl twelve years ago.

AN HOUR LATER, Frank is walked, the kitchen is much cleaner, and I walk outside with the dry cleaning bag slung over one arm. It's a short walk, only five blocks, and if I'm lucky, they'll have it done by tomorrow afternoon.

Taking a second for myself, I lift my face to the bright fall sun and breathe deeply. Cars maneuver down the two-lane street, a few people are out and about, but we got lucky and live in a relatively quiet area.

As I turn to my right and start walking, the back of my neck prickles.

Almost like someone is watching me...

Quickly, I glance over my shoulder.

Two moms are walking their babies in strollers, a maintenance crew is unloading into a brick town house, and a few guys are smoking outside a barber shop down the street.

Otherwise, it's quiet. But as I continue on my way, I can't help the stiffness in my shoulders.

Sometimes the instincts that come with being a lawyer are more trouble than they're worth.

Chapter 8

Chris

“You wanted these, Mr. Sharpe?”

Looking up from the pile of documents on my desk, the breath literally leaves my body.

Autumn is all business—her hair swinging at that severe angle, a tailored black blazer downplaying her curves, high-waisted trousers tapering above her hips.

She looks every inch the serious lawyer. But her eyes—those almond-shaped eyes will never be as severe as the rest of her.

“Yes,” I say automatically, no idea what she’s holding in her hand. “Thank you.”

She steps into the office without looking away from me. There it is again—that distrustful narrowing of the eyes, as if she inherently doubts me. It makes my heart sink. I must’ve done something...but what?

Maybe she wanted me to say *no* that night in the car. Maybe it was some kind of test.

This woman, though, will only ever hear the word *yes* from my lips. Especially if she’s stroking my thigh the way she did that night.

My cock twitches to attention and I banish the thoughts from my mind, standing to take the padded package from her. It’s almost weightless, all paper and bubbles. I look to her with a questioning expression.

“The video from that day.” Autumn’s done is direct, sure, professional. It’s Monday and everyone has left the building already, but the line she’s drawing is clear. I’m her boss.

“Ah. Thank you.”

Slipping the package next to my laptop, I turn my attention back to the copy of the police report on my desk. A headache is already throbbing at the edges of my temples.

Cases like this drain me. But I’ll stay as late as I have to tonight until every ounce of information is absorbed.

I’m not letting this guy walk away from what he did.

It takes me a moment to realize Autumn is still in the room. Her scent, that toasty vanilla, eases the ache in my skull. When I glance up, her eyes meet mine.

“Is this...?”

She reaches toward the desk, hesitates.

I nod and she picks up a sheaf of papers.

“Marie Waters.”

I let out a deep sigh at the girl’s name. It’s been all over the news for days now, ever since she accused her chorus teacher of sexual assault.

It’s easy to see Autumn is curious, I just don’t have it in me right now to indulge her interest. All day, people wander by my office—those who know I’ve taken on the case—and gaze in as if they’ll get answers to their questions.

Did he really do it?

Why didn’t she come forward sooner?

What if she’s lying?

“The teacher is Reid McCarty, right? But I don’t see...”

Her eyes sweep the desk again, confused.

“Oh, I don’t have anything from his side of the case yet. Still waiting on the courier.”

Autumn’s eyebrows raise as it hits her.

“You’re representing the girl, then?”

“Of course I am.”

There’s a tense moment where we stare at one another. It’s obvious she expected me to be defending the villain, and a wave of bitterness sweeps through me.

Only...now that severe look is gone.

Those almond eyes are more open. They blink slowly and I'm lost in them all over again. All I want is to reach across the desk, draw her in, and drown out a day's stress with her plush mouth.

"Can I...?"

"Of course."

Autumn sits down with the papers in her lap and an intense gaze. She's in work mode.

"You should go home, Miss Cavendish. It's late."

"Mmm." The case has obviously caught her attention, and I'd give anything to know what thoughts are brewing in her head. "Frank will be okay until I get home."

My heart stutters to a stop in my chest.

Frank?

Is that a boyfriend? A lover?

Miss Cavendish. She's not married, but that doesn't mean there isn't another guy in the picture. My face gets hot, red bleeding into my vision as I try to process this information.

"I was reading about the case this morning on the train. McCarty's team is taking the stance that she has no real parenting, no guidance, right?"

Cracking my neck and clearing my throat, I try to focus on the task at hand. Whatever Autumn gets up to in her life outside of work isn't my concern.

Not unless she tries to climb in my lap again.

"Yes. Marie's mother left the family when she was a toddler. Initially, Mr. Waters filed a missing person report—but it turns out his wife was having an affair. Reporters found her before the police did, and she made some scathing remarks that were seen by a lot of people. It was an embarrassing situation. And unfortunately, one that gives McCarty's team a shot at theorizing that Marie has only had negative influences when it comes to relationships."

"*Relationships.*" Autumn spits the word out. "This wasn't a relationship. It was what—two years—of assault?"

"Oh, I know. But that's not what McCarty is saying."

"Either way, she's fifteen. She was fourteen when it started, if you can prove that."

Unlocking and pulling open my desk drawer, I take out a pink and blue floral diary. Place it on top of all the paperwork. "I can prove it."

Autumn's eyes light up in that way I recognize, the way all lawyers' do when they know they have good evidence.

"She wrote about it?"

"She did. Vaguely at first, but then in more detail. It's unmistakable—this all started happening about a month and a half after her fourteenth birthday."

The disgusted look on Autumn's face makes me smile flatly.

"Yeah. That's about how I've felt since I offered to pick up the case."

Her eyes snap up, that curious, intense look in them again. "Since you offered...?"

"Mr. Waters has been on disability for the last few years after an accident at work. He'd never be able to pay for the kind of lawyer he needs."

"So you're doing this pro bono," Autumn murmurs.

The way she's looking at me stirs something inside.

There's still a longing in me to stand up, lean over the desk, and let that mouth pull me into oblivion.

Marie Waters is more important, though. I'm sure Autumn would understand. It hits me that this is the first time since I laid eyes on her that I would willingly rebuff her if she tried what she did in the car.

She won't, though. I can see it in the way she's sitting, leaning forward, still taking in all the paperwork on my desk.

"And that?"

She tips her chin toward the little package I still haven't opened.

"According to Marie, it's going to show one of the last incidents of abuse. Around when she started saying 'no' very vocally. She told the detective and myself that we'll see McCarty pull her into a classroom after practice for a play the school is putting on." Leaning back, I play with the corner of the package. Something in me doesn't want to open it yet. Just in case it isn't the smoking gun we need.

"You're holding off."

I smile sourly at her across the desk. "I am. You know, it drives me a little crazy that you can read me like a book, but I know nothing about you."

My gaze dips down, as if to say, *Except what you like to wear under those blazers and blouses.*

But I keep the quip to myself and instead stand, moving my chair aside.

"Come here."

She freezes, looking up at me with those pretty eyes. Any other night, this might lead to something explosive, delectable.

I start ripping into the package. Autumn startles and stands, coming around the desk to stand next to me.

One tap of the keyboard and the laptop lights up, bathing us both in light. Her scent surrounds me completely now, oddly calming in this tense moment.

Clicking the USB drive into the port, we're both holding our breath as the video file pops up. It's actually a slew of files taken from the school by the detective—but I know which day and which camera number we're looking for.

The file opens and I have to drag the video ahead, to just after 5 p.m. on September 19. A few kids move down the hallway in a group, chatting excitedly. Seconds later, a female teacher strides toward what I'm pretty sure is the exit—coat on, purse over one arm.

Then there are whole minutes of nothing.

Autumn shifts, her arm grazing my chest. Neither of us realized we were so close, and she pulls back. Now, there's another kind of tension in the air.

She's waiting to see if I'll react.

The truth is, my body is buzzing at her proximity. A part of me *does* want to react, but not for sex.

What I really want is to wrap an arm around her waist, pull her in, feel her body against mine as the stress of this day—this situation—pours over us.

I don't want to feel alone anymore in the dirty, cruel truth of the world.

That realization is a surprise. I've always operated on an every-man-for-himself basis, protecting and building what I have to support those outside of this cutthroat life.

Nate, Eva, and Gen. Now Jenson, Mel, and Milo.

My lips press flat as someone new comes on the screen. I recognize her immediately—Marie. We've met twice now under the care of her exhausted father and the detective on her case.

In the video, her hair is in a ponytail, hands gripping the straps of her backpack. She could be any other teenager.

Except, I know what happened to her.

And I see the way she glances nervously over her shoulder.

The threat isn't behind her, though. It's only seconds, and Reid McCarty steps out of a door to the left and reaches out. Marie sees him, flinches away, and there's the fuzzy audio.

“No—”

It's muffled, but she says it again. Throws a “please” in.

Autumn's body goes tense next to mine. We don't care about brushing against one another anymore, both of us bent over the laptop, Autumn tucked into my chest as we watch McCarty yank the girl forcefully into the classroom.

The door closes.

Nothing happens as the seconds tick by. They don't come back out.

Unfortunately, I know that already, too. I asked Marie to estimate how long he had her in there. She didn't have to guess because the whole time, she watched the clock over his shoulder as he assaulted her.

Forty-eight minutes.

Letting out a deep, exhausted breath, I click the little x in the corner of the screen. "Excuse me," I murmur, shifting the laptop so I can sit down. My fingers dance over the keys.

I want a backup. Two or three of them, if necessary. I want to email our IT team and have a copy encrypted. I want to make sure I have this video and audio the day I step into court to go up against McCarty on behalf of the girl he's been violating for years.

"That's horrible." Autumn is shaking her head. She goes back to the other side of the desk but doesn't sit. Instead she leans against the chair. Seeing those moments has taken a lot out of us, and there's a sense of camaraderie there now. Another thread that ties us together.

I wonder if Autumn feels the first thread—the obsession.

She can't, though, not the way I do, or she wouldn't pull away from me. She'd want it just as badly as I do.

"The good thing in this pile of shit is that we have this now. It's irrefutable—she said no. Twice."

"They'll argue that we don't know what happened behind that door."

"I don't think that will matter. Anyone can see—" my gaze cuts to her, eyes boring in "—anyone can see how violently he pulled her into that room. How scared she was."

Autumn looks tired, and for a moment I wish I hadn't let her see this. *She's a lawyer, too*, I remind myself. Last week, I went back and looked over her résumé, her previous cases. *She has just as much experience with the sick and twisted in this world.*

Which might be why she gives me a sad smile. "That's true, but for girls, the truth rarely makes a difference. They'll see that she doesn't have a family and—" Her voice breaks. It catches her off guard and she clears her throat,

straightening up. My eyes narrow. “Just be ready for them to claim she wanted it. Men like to insist that they know what we want. You’ll need a well-balanced jury.”

Somehow, in those short sentences, she’s gone back to fully professional. Her gaze is cool, chilly, almost, as she nods goodnight and turns to leave.

I watch her go.

Wondering who she is and where she comes from.

Wondering who she’s going home to while I sit here, alone, in my dark office.

Chapter 9

Autumn

Weakness.

The word has been haunting me since last night.

I feel weak, and I hate it. The blush-colored dress I'm wearing is actually embarrassing, though no one else at Sharpe Law will see it for what it is—weakness.

It's only Tuesday, and already the week has been too much. Getting home last night, I felt bad for leaving Frank for so long. He was home with Orla, of course, who took him out for two walks and spoiled him with some leftover chicken added to his dinner. But when I walked in, he was parked right by the door, waiting for me and whining.

We don't deserve dogs. They're too pure.

Which brings my thoughts back to how *impure* humans can be.

The case last night, the one Chris was working on. I remember seeing Marie Waters's photo in the article I read. A scared girl in front of all those cameras, accusing a man whom countless other students claimed was a beloved teacher.

I don't envy Chris what he has ahead of him. It's going to be messy, and even if justice is served, Marie's life is already tainted by that man.

Pro bono; he's doing it pro bono.

It still surprises me, and as I step into the elevator with a few other

employees, I wonder why. Chris Sharpe is a defense lawyer; so are all the other lawyers here except for a small estate-handling division on the second floor.

Maybe he just wants another notch in his belt. Maybe he just wants to win this case to add to his reputation.

But that doesn't sit right, either. Sharpe Law isn't attached to Marie's case yet, not publicly. I'm sure by the end of the day it will be. But if Chris was doing this for publicity, I imagine he'd be right out front of the building holding a press conference. Letting everyone know he's doing this for free.

I'm not sure anyone in the office even knows, though.

Which makes last night feel even more intimate...

No. I shake the thought off. Not intimate—nothing inappropriate happened. The temp who hands out the mail mistakenly lumped that package in with mine, and I had a duty to bring it to him. I went into that office with my hackles already raised, ready to fend him off.

I was surprised when he didn't try anything. Even when we were pressed up against one another, holding our breath as Marie Waters appeared on that computer screen.

The elevator doors open and I step off, squaring my shoulders against the day. I fully intend to be out by 3 p.m. Frank has a grooming appointment and I badly need to decompress. With the overtime I put in last night, leaving early today shouldn't be a problem.

I'll have to outline what I want done very clearly for my team, though, so I head right for my office. The windows along the south side of the building catch the morning light beautifully, in a hazy way.

I'm just starting to relax when Christine, one of my legal aides, pauses in the hallway and says, "Your office is absolutely gorgeous! I'm jealous!"

I give her a confused smile, slowing down but not stopping.

There's a collection of cubicles right outside my office, and the paralegals who work there are all whispering and glancing in my direction.

A sour sensation twists my gut.

I reach the wall of opaque glass and put my hand on the doorknob. It's like ice.

Pulling the door open, I don't step inside.

It's like a slap in the face.

The desk, chairs, cabinetry at the back of the office, and even some of the floor space is overflowing with flowers.

Vases and vases of flowers.

Very specific flowers—anemones.

My heart drops into my stomach as I take a step back. It's bad timing, and an intern jostles into me, apologizing as he continues on.

Someone takes my elbow and I turn to find Louise, the floor secretary, at my side.

"Honey, I'm so sorry. I signed for them, but I didn't realize it was such a big delivery, and there's really nowhere else to put them, you know the conference rooms are booked solid today —"

"It's fine," I answer blandly, giving her a blank smile. "Don't worry about it, Louise. You couldn't have known."

Her eyes twinkle as she leans in close. "You must have quite a gentleman courting you, hmm? This is *expensive*."

"It is."

I stare into the office at the red, purple, blue, and pink frilled flowers.

"Beautiful!" someone comments as they pass.

It takes me a second to realize I've been standing in the doorway too long. Louise shifts awkwardly next to me, starting to catch on that something's wrong.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee? There are some pastries in the lounge..."

I shake my head, thanking her and forcing myself to step into the room. But my hand drops off the doorknob; I can't shut myself in here with all this.

With the past.

Because I know exactly who these came from. I just don't know how or why.

The last I knew, he didn't have enough money to afford a pack of cigarettes. So how the hell did he fill my office with anemones?

Putting my purse in the corner, because there's no other option, I dig my cell out of my coat pocket and start to text Orla.

What am I going to say, though?

Hey, my ex is back from who knows where and he just filled my office with flowers after he almost beat me to death. Just letting you know! In case he stalks me, shows up at the apartment, and tries to smother me in my bed.

"Oh my gosh, so gorgeous!" another person in the hallway comments.

It's starting to get irritating, but I can't think straight. My head is fuzzy with fear, disbelief, and a string of questions.

I toss the phone onto my purse, shuck off my jacket, and close the door. My hands are shaking. I clench them into fists and stare angrily down at this stupid pink dress.

A champagne blush color that I love.

A reminder of who I used to be—*before* I went to law school.

The young woman living in a rundown apartment building with her father as his kidneys failed. A brother with one foot on the wrong side of the tracks and a boyfriend who could be sweet one moment—bringing me a bouquet of anemones, the prettiest flowers I'd ever seen—and violent the next, his fingers digging into my throat.

I gasp out a breath.

It's as if he's here right now, choking me. Spitting threats and reminding me over and over—*You're mine, Autumn. Mine.*

The office door bangs open, startling me out of a panic attack. Sucking in a breath, I press a hand to my chest as Chris Sharpe steps in.

His dark eyes rove over the room. They come back to me, take me in from nude-colored heels up, dragging his gaze up the dress clinging to me.

Our eyes meet. I feel like I can breathe again, but there's something else in the room now.

Rage.

Chris's voice is deadly quiet, cold, and cuts like a knife.

“What the hell is this?”

Chapter 10

Chris

Somewhere in the back of my mind, it registers that Autumn's dress matches the light creamy pink of the flowers. Except the fabric draping her curves has a sheen to it, one that appears buttery soft, and no matter how high the neck is on this dress, she still looks sexy and sleek.

"What the hell is this?"

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. Everyone in the building has been talking about this—the flowers spilling out of an office, the decadence, the romance. It didn't matter to me until I heard *her* name.

Moments ago, as I turned the corner coming here, Louise confirmed it.

Oh, it's Miss Cavendish's office. She seems so surprised! You'd almost think they were from a secret admirer, but it's quite extravagant—

As jealousy and blind rage flood through my veins, Autumn doesn't move. She has one hand pressed to her chest. Her face is white, fingers trembling, eyes wide.

"Autumn?"

I take a step toward her. She stumbles back, loses her balance on the heels, and I barely catch her. Hefting her body against mine, I draw her toward the two chairs near the balcony entrance. Her skin is cool, too cool to the touch for how warm the office is.

She slips from my hold and into a chair. Her shoes fall away and she pulls

her feet up under her body, tightening the dress around her hips as she does so. Her arms wrap tightly around her waist and she tucks herself as far back as she can, pressing away from me.

I kneel on the ground in front of her. The feel of the carpeting against my knees drains away the hot rush of anger I felt before.

I remember Louise's words again. *She seemed so surprised!*

"Autumn. You're okay. The door is shut, it's just you and me. Here —"

I stand, stride back toward the door, lock it. The sound of the click is loud in the room and catches her attention.

Before going back to her, I assess the situation.

Everything about her posture right now screams that something is very wrong. She's in protective mode; I've seen victims act the same in court. Trying to take up as little space as they can. Tightening in on themselves. Going blank.

Walking back over, I get on my knees again and take a chance. "Autumn. I'm not mad, okay? You're safe, but you need to tell me what's going on."

Reaching out, I let my fingertips graze her knee. She doesn't pull away and her eyes meet mine. A little color stains her throat, at least, so she's not so pale.

"Who did this?" The question is direct, though this time I'm not asking out of jealousy.

"My ex."

"Your...ex. Your ex bought all these flowers and had them delivered to your office. You don't want to see him?"

Immediately, she shakes her head. Her arms are still wrapped around her waist. I let my fingers cover more of her, wrapping under her knee, holding her gently but firmly.

"Okay. Do you want to talk to security? So we can make sure he doesn't come here again?"

Her eyes snap to mine. "He's not a good person, Chris."

I let that sink in. The tone she said it in was serious, lacking the fuzzy disjointed feeling of her earlier words.

"I don't want to tell security. It'll just make him angry, and he'll do something—" Autumn shuts her mouth, frowning as she chooses what to say next. The lawyer in me is on high alert now. Whatever's happening is serious.

"Here."

Getting a better hold on her, I tug Autumn toward me, and out of the chair. She looks confused, slightly distrusting, but obeys. I sit down and pull her into my lap crosswise until she's pressed against me. My hands are on her now, though they don't roam.

I just want her to know I'm here. I want her to feel safe.

After a moment, she leans against me. I wrap an arm around her waist, willing my body heat to warm her out of whatever shock she's in. Her feet are bare and her toenails are painted a pretty shade of red that makes my heart ache.

In this moment, she seems so vulnerable, and I have to ask.

"Autumn, it sounds like this isn't someone you're going to be able to take care of yourself. Is that right?"

Even though I'm expecting her answer, it still surprises me.

"No. Nothing I do will scare him off. He'll just..."

She trails off.

I rest my chin on top of her head and mull this over. Autumn Cavendish, the woman who stormed into Sharpe Law and practically demanded the position of partner, doesn't think she can handle whoever this guy is.

And judging by her reaction to this weird, borderline stalker situation... she might be right.

Right away, I feel a rushing need to protect her. My brain fills with different scenarios and possibilities.

"You need to tell me his name. And I know you don't want security on the lookout for him, but it's what's best. If he shows up again —"

"That'll just make him angry," she insists, turning to look up at me. Suddenly, she isn't the intimidating woman I've been admiring for weeks now. She's still gorgeous, still capable, but it hits me just how vulnerable she really is.

It reminds me of what she said last night in my office...the way her voice hitched when she mentioned what happens when a girl doesn't have family.

"If he was comfortable doing this, he's not going to respect boundaries, Autumn. We need to tell security. Or at the very least, the head of security. They'll need to walk you to the parking garage when you leave and I'll have them wait for you in the morning —"

"I don't have a car."

One corner of her lips lift in a wry smile. Internally, I sigh in frustration, but if she's giving me an attitude, it's a good sign. There's more color in her

cheeks now and the way she's pressing against me is more present, whether she realizes it or not.

"You...take the subway?"

Of course, she mentioned the train the other night, too. It's been years since I've taken the subway. It didn't even cross my mind.

Strange, though, because I have a good idea of what we pay our senior associates. Autumn can definitely afford a car.

That's a discussion for another time. For now, we have to deal with the reality of the situation.

"Well, you can't take the subway home anymore."

"What? Chris —"

"Be realistic, Autumn. He knows you work here. He can show up whenever he wants. Even if security is looking out for him, they can only do so much once you leave the property. If he follows you to the station..."

I don't need to go into further detail. I can see it playing out in her mind. The steep stairways. The dark corners, bad lighting.

She shivers and I pull her into me tighter, her hip pressed between my widened legs. It takes everything in me to not bury my nose in her hair and breathe her in.

Thank God the door is locked. If Louise or anyone else walked in here and saw us like this...

So much for promising Grant that I'd keep it professional at the office.

"I'll drive you home," I blurt out without thinking.

She pulls away, giving me an annoyed look. "Chris, *no*. That's not— people would talk if they —"

"The alternative is, he finds you."

The words hit her hard. I can tell by the way her face goes pale again, eyes faraway. Autumn goes still.

Then her shoulders slump in defeat.

"Just tonight."

She gives me a sidelong glance. I nod, agreeing, even though we both know that *just for tonight* isn't a solution. If she's agreeing at all, even with this compromise, it means she's scared.

I want her safe.

I *need* her safe.

I won't let her walk out of here when someone could be waiting just around the corner. Not when I've only had a taste of her.

It's too soon.

Trying to ignore the desperate voice in my head, I start to untangle us from the seat. The clock on her desk reads 9:15 a.m. I'll be meeting with Detective Jacobson soon, and someone is bound to notice that we've been locked in here for so long.

Standing, I hold out a hand to her. The way she looks up at me almost breaks me.

"I'll have someone come and clean all this out. There's an empty office down the hall; I can have Louise book it for you until they're finished, if that's agreeable."

She nods, taking my hand and standing. Without heels, she's a few inches shorter than me. Those red toes make my heart lurch again, and I fight the urge to pull her into my arms.

Instead, I take her chin and lean down. My parted lips brush against hers.

It seems to startle her out of whatever dark thoughts she's been lost in. Her breath catches and she sways forward.

But before this can turn into something real, I pull back.

Just enough to meet her eyes and murmur, "I need you to tell me his name, Autumn. I need to know who did this to you."

Chapter 11

Autumn

“You’re sure you’re fine?” Orla anxiously glances up and down the street, as if she’s expecting Kieran to jump out from behind a trash can.

Gently pulling Frank away from a half-eaten breakfast sandwich outside, I answer, “Yes. I’ll be fine. It’s just an Uber to the office. Not a big deal.”

Not an expense I want to deal with, either, but it’s my only option. Growing up poor has left its mark; I have a hard time spending money on *anything*, even now that I’m more than financially secure.

Orla is a great example—I could definitely afford an apartment on my own, without needing a roommate. But I like saving the extra four hundred dollars a month.

And you need the company, the frustrating voice in the back of my head reminds me. *You’re scared to be alone.*

A shiver goes through me and I pull my puffy coat tighter around my waist. Frank looks up at me with pleading eyes, as if begging me not to go to work today.

It’s 7 a.m. Wednesday morning. *The day after.*

The day after *he* reappeared in my life.

How? And why?

But now isn’t the time for those questions. I still have to get upstairs, change out of my sweats and into decent clothes, apologize to Frank again,

and get to work.

Pretend it's all okay.

Field vague questions about who left the flowers, and why I had them cleared out of the office almost immediately.

Everyone will think it was me, of course, but it was actually Chris who gave the orders. Chris who drove me home once the office was quiet enough for no one to notice.

"I'm just saying...I bet if you texted him, he'd come get you."

Orla gives me a worried glance as she opens the door for Frank and me. We all head into the foyer, wait for the elevator of kids heading to school to unload.

"No thanks." The thing is, I know he would. I'm pretty sure Chris would do anything for me if I asked. And that makes me nervous. "I really don't need to get any closer to him, Orla," I tell her dryly.

She has no idea how far it's gone. *Too far.*

I told her about hooking up in his car, going along with her plan, but I definitely did not tell her about snuggling up into his arms yesterday when I was anything but logical.

About how safe I felt sheltered against his broad chest, which rumbled as he made his demands.

Just tonight.

It's a promise I intend to keep. I can't go running to Chris Sharpe for protection.

He's my enemy.

Ugh. Why does that feel like such a weak response these days? If you'd asked me who Christopher Sharpe was two years ago, or even a few weeks ago, I would've spit those words out like venom.

But these days, he feels more like my savior.

"It's fine," I bite out in response to Orla's desperate, worried looks. "I've got it under control. Everything is fine."

Who am I really trying to reassure—her, or myself?



MARTY PICKED THE WRONG DAY.

"That was completely inappropriate."

The words are like ice as they leave my lips. Marty cocks a hip out and grins, the plaid pencil skirt she's wearing clashing garishly with her blouse.

"I don't know what to tell you, Autumn. If a client decides you can't handle their case, they'll leave you either way—whether they choose to work with me, or another firm."

A smugness settles across her features and only stokes the fire in me. It's taking everything I have not to hurl a stapler at her as we have it out over the desk of Saskia, the paralegal who first informed me that Officer Wilcox was now going to be represented by Marty instead of me.

Except it didn't go quite like that—Saskia realized all the files related to the case were missing from the system.

She sounded the alarm, and over the last two hours, we figured out what happened. During this fiasco, Marty sashayed her way around, looking like the cat who ate the canary. She had to know what we were all panicking about, but she didn't say a word.

"I'm not talking about Wilcox choosing to work with you, Marty, I'm talking about the fact that you had your paralegal pull everything from the system without notifying me or my team. It goes against protocol."

She manages an airheaded look, one that might actually convince HR that she truly didn't know the rules regarding hand off. Which is bullshit.

Marty leans across the desk, forcing Saskia to sit back abruptly. She raises a brow conspiratorially, but her voice is loud as she says, "Autumn, I think you should go calm down somewhere. There's no need to get all worked up over losing a client. There will be plenty more." The pulse throbbing in my head only intensifies as she adds, "I'd be happy to throw you a bone. I'm sure we can pare down our own caseload, especially to help out another *associate*."

She says the word like it's a curse, and the meaning is clear—she's drawing a line between us. I'm the designated associate. She plans on moving up to partner.

And she actually thinks these games will secure her the position.

"Going forward," I hiss through gritted teeth, "you come directly to *me* before pulling my cases."

Marty hums flippantly and turns away, giving Saskia a slight sneer. Her head is held high as she heads off to her own office where, undoubtedly, her team is gathered to work on the Wilcox case.

"I'm sorry," Saskia whispers. "If I'd caught it earlier —"

“No. It’s not your fault; it was out of your hands. And honestly, it’s not a loss. There are other clients we can focus our attention on.”

I give her a soft, encouraging smile. Not exactly the workplace demeanor I’m going for, but I can’t help it. Marty pisses me off. I don’t like the way she treats the legal teams helping us out and I don’t like her sneaky tactics.

Feeling like a pot about to boil over, I stride through the halls and toward Chris’s office. I wasn’t planning on seeing him at all today.

In fact, I was planning on dodging him. With the threat of Kieran in the back of my mind, I don’t need to deal with another man deciding how I should navigate my life—even if I’m starting to think maybe he has my best interests at heart.

Head in the game, I remind myself, ignoring the looks I’m getting as I turn a corner. Everyone in the office heard the confrontation between Marty and me. I’m not sure who came out looking worse. I don’t really care.

In a scene mirroring yesterday morning, but in reverse, I push Chris’s office door open and find him standing at the window. It’s not much of a view; Sharpe Law is situated for easy access for clients, not for aesthetics.

He looks over his shoulder and my heart stutters in my chest.

Why does the man have to be so damn good-looking? For a second, the anger bleeds away, but then I remember how Marty undermined me just minutes ago.

“We need to talk.”

Chris raises a brow. The amusement and curiosity on his face is annoying.

“Okay. Shoot.”

“Marty took over my client, Eli Wilcox. She couldn’t have done so without your consent.”

He turns away from the window, with its view of the street and lunch vendors, and circles toward his desk.

“That’s true. She spoke to me about it yesterday evening. I approved it.” He looks up, dark eyes meeting mine, and it’s like I can feel him right next to me even with the room separating us. “I didn’t think bringing it up last night would be...productive, considering everything you went through.”

He means the nervous wreck I was, even by the end of the day, when I begrudgingly let him drive me home. Again. At least this time we didn’t stop in a random park to fuck in his car.

“I don’t care, you should have told me. She did it behind my back, had

her para move everything from the system, and had my team running around like chickens with their heads cut off. She made me look incompetent, Chris, and that's unacceptable."

His eyes narrow. He sits on the edge of his desk. I hadn't realized it, but while I was talking, I moved toward him, and now there's less than three feet between us. His bent knee points in my direction. Briefly, I remember reading an article once about how people position themselves when they're attracted to you.

Wide stance, manspreading, one foot pointing toward me. He's trying to look casual, but I catch the way his gaze dips down my body. It really ratchets up my irritation and I take a step toward him.

"I'm surprised you're this upset. We both know the Wilcox case is going to be a shit show."

"That doesn't matter."

It's a lie, because a part of me *is* relieved. Wilcox is a local cop who tased a woman repeatedly. He had no real reason to do so except that she didn't turn around when he called out to her—because she doesn't speak English. She had no idea he was directing a question at her, and the situation quickly escalated, ending with her on the ground, experiencing the beginning of a minor heart attack.

"You told him to settle, and he didn't want to. Marty is willing to take it to court."

"She'll lose."

Amusement flickers across Chris's face again; he agrees, I know it. What I don't know is what his issue is right now. But from the smirk gracing his lips, he's enjoying himself.

"So what? If it's what the client wants, Autumn, that's what they'll get. Some people don't know what's best for them."

As he says those last words, he stands. I'm reminded briefly of the other day—how, with my shoes off and just a few inches between us, that slight difference in height made me quiver with wanting him. Chris isn't the NBA-level tall that most women want these days, but something about those few inches did me in.

"I can't figure you out."

It slips out accidentally, and I bite my lip as Chris's eyes widen in surprise. These past weeks he's been very open about not being able to get a read on me, but here I am, admitting that I'm just as caught off guard by him.

“There’s not much to figure out,” he says quietly, stepping into my space.

There’s only inches between us now. I can feel his body heat through my clothes, and it makes me want to peel them off. How would he react if he saw what I have on underneath? Has he wondered, thought about it, since that first day in my office?

My head is dizzy with warnings, desires, anger, questions, and confusion as he slips a hand over my waist.

“You’re upset with me,” he murmurs, leaning in to brush his lips against my ear. I arch my back, wanting to feel more of him, but he stays just out of reach.

“Let me make it up to you.”

Unable to hold back any longer, I turn my head just as Chris turns his and our lips crash together. His cover mine perfectly. I suck, laving my tongue over his bottom lip as he moans into my mouth.

“Shh.”

His hands grip my hips roughly. I’m already wet, thankful I’m wearing a dress as he turns us and walks me backward toward his desk. Lifting me by my ass, he sits me on top and then strides back toward the door.

The lock snaps shut.

When he turns back to face me, his dark eyes are intense. They meet mine only once before dropping to where my dress is bunched up around my thighs.

Licking my lips, I reach down and pull the hem even higher, spreading my legs. It’s a desperate move, one I should be ashamed of, but there’s no time for shame as Chris drops to his knees in front of me and slides the fabric even higher. Goose bumps break out over my bare thighs. He looks up, slips a hand beneath the skirt, and searches.

Within seconds, he’s pulling my panties down and off. I watch him pocket them, a smirk on his face. It’s a loss I’ll probably regret later since they were an expensive pair—sheer floral lace with bows up the back.

“God, you’re already wet for me.”

He’s ducked his head under the dress, too, and all I can see is the stretch of white shirt over his broad shoulders as his muscles shift and bunch. Closing my eyes, I let my head tip back and focus on the sensation of his fingertips.

They’re everywhere. Roaming my thighs, teasing the sensitive skin just south of my core, smoothing over my belly, wrapping around my calf.

I try to close my legs around him for some kind of friction, *any* friction, and let out a quiet desperate sound. He chuckles against me, lips pressed to my inner thigh, tongue darting out to leave a cool trail.

“Chris,” I gasp, on the verge of not caring if anyone hears. I *want* him. I want him to make me feel good, I want him to make me forget how pissed off and scared I’ve been these last few days.

As if he’s heard my thoughts, he focuses all his attention on the one place that’s pulsing for him.

His mouth brushes over my pussy and I jump, surprised at the sudden sensation. His beard, kept trim and short but still stubbly, feels perfect against my skin. My thighs are hot around his head and his hands grip my hips, holding me steady as he dives in, lapping at me like I’m a dessert he’s been craving all day.

“Mmm, right there,” I hum, the sounds barely words as his tongue flicks across my clit. His fingers dig in at my praise and he’s making his own sounds, growls that might be commands or curses, I can’t tell.

Unexpectedly, he sits back on his heels and yanks me forward. I gasp, almost falling off the desk, tipping precariously forward. But this new position is perfect—I’m practically riding his face as he grips my waist.

There’s *no way* we’re coming out of this looking put together. With his face buried in my pussy like this, he’s going to look like he just devoured a peach. And I doubt I’ll do much better as my legs start to quake with his insistent plundering.

Chris pulls back again, takes a deep breath, and stands. He keeps one hand on my stomach. The pressure feels good, grounds me, as he presses me back against the desk.

“Stay there.”

He nudges my legs farther apart, face serious as he situates us just how he wants. My eyes drop to his belt. Is he actually planning on...?

But he doesn’t make a move to shuck his pants off. I’m part relieved, part disappointed, wanting to feel filled and stretched again by his perfect cock.

Slowly, his eyes locked on mine, Chris runs his fingers over my pussy. I hold my breath as he reaches my clit, then drags them back down, prodding my entrance.

Please, please, please.

I barely manage to keep the words in. His lips stretch into a cocky grin as he slowly presses two thick fingers into my core, stretching me the way I’ve

been needing so badly.

A low moan slips out and he leans over me, thumb grazing my clit as his lips brush against mine.

“Shh.” He says it teasingly, mocking when I shushed him earlier, and then he bites my bottom lip and sucks it.

That, combined with the sudden way he pumps his fingers at a bruising pace, sends me over the edge in seconds. My body tightens up, muscles going taut and hands gripping the desk as I come, whimpering to try and stay quiet.

Even as the orgasm ebbs, Chris doesn't let up. He keeps a steady rhythm, his eyes moving over my face as I try and catch my breath.

Finally, his fingers slip gently from my core. I press my legs together, satiated and slightly embarrassed.

After all, I'm sat on my boss's desk with the skirt of my dress up around my hips. My pussy throbs with satisfaction and just a hint of disappointment. I can't help running my eyes down Chris's body, his rumpled trousers and the very prominent erection pressing against them.

Adjusting himself, he grins down at me.

“Maybe next time.”

I scoff lightly, wanting to say, *There's not going to be a next time.*

I've been trained to spot lies, though, so instead, I just roll my eyes and focus instead on *not* looking like I just came in the middle of the workday.

Chapter 12

Chris

Pulling my car up to the curb Thursday night, I try to keep a smug look off my face. Autumn definitely would not appreciate it. And it might make her turn down a ride home, which is the last thing I want.

Maybe I managed to soften her up. It's a nice thought, but a self-indulgent one. Just because she let me get her off in the office yesterday, right on the heels of an adrenaline-filled argument, doesn't mean she wants anything more to do with me.

Her eyes sweep the street. I frown; she must still be worried. There haven't been any more flower deliveries at the firm, but that doesn't mean her ex isn't still lurking around. If she's concerned, I need to be on high alert.

"Maybe we should stop at a locksmith," I murmur, stopping her from getting out of the car just yet. "You can buy a deadbolt. I don't know what the locks on your doors are like, but —"

She gives me a sarcastic look, hand on the door handle.

"I have more than enough locks on the door, Chris. And I need to get home and walk the dog."

"Walk the dog where?"

I can tell she's getting frustrated with my questioning, but something is setting my alarm bells off. She glances over her shoulder, too tired to keep giving me an attitude.

“I usually take him to Central Park. It’s only a few blocks away.”

In my head, I try to envision roughly where we are—a slightly residential area of Manhattan. Can’t be cheap, but the building we’re in front of isn’t pricey, either. It’s an understated beige stone building with iron guards in front of the windows.

Autumn opens the door and steps out onto the sidewalk. Pocketing my keys, I get out, too, and walk around the car.

“I’m coming with you.”

She stares at me incredulously.

“No, you’re not.”

Locking the car doors to make a point, I stare her down.

“Yes, I am. You shouldn’t be walking alone in the park this late.”

Her laugh is disbelieving, a surprisingly rich sound that I wasn’t expecting. “It’s just after five. I’d hardly say that’s late.”

But already the sun is setting behind these buildings, red-tinged golden light bathing the trees. “It is for this time of year. You’ve got maybe half an hour of sunlight left. Let me come with you. Then I’ll go home.”

Her lips press into a flat line, eyes narrow as she considers. I’m praying she has a moment of giving in to authority, which doesn’t exactly seem to be Autumn’s vibe.

“Fine,” she sighs, turning toward the building, keys already in hand. My heart jumps in my chest.

You shouldn’t be excited about this, I chide myself. It means nothing; you’re just keeping her safe.



THE ELEVATOR OPENS and Autumn steps out to the right, down to an inconspicuous apartment door. I’m scanning everything, looking for a weak point. If her ex shows up, I want to know the building is at least relatively safe.

Putting her key in the lock, she won’t look at me. Nerves, maybe? What could she be afraid of me seeing?

Once the door clicks, she finally looks over her shoulder. “Stay here. Please.”

It almost, *almost* comes off as begging. Trying to quash my piqued

curiosity, I raise my brows slightly and keep my hands in my pockets. She slips through the door and disappears.

The sounds coming from the other side catch my attention immediately.

“Hi, baby.” I hear her gush in a tone she’s never used before. Blood rushes to my ears. Of course, she has someone at home. I’m an idiot for insisting on walking her dog with her. There’s probably a man here that she doesn’t want me to see, a boyfriend, a lover, maybe a dog sitter —

“I’m so sorry—did you have a good day without me? What did you get up to?”

There’s one, two beats—and still no response. A strange thumping sound coming from the apartment makes me frown. Then the door opens, and a dog rushes out into the hallway, quickly squaring off with me.

We stare at one another. He’s clearly some kind of mutt, a mix of breeds, maybe a little terrier in there with the wiry hair at his neck and ears. Lean but muscled, he stands between Autumn and me as she reappears with her coat still on.

“It’s okay, Frank. Be nice.”

Frank.

Frank.

That name has been on my radar since I heard it from her lips, and now I feel like a complete idiot.

Frank is her dog.

He warily sniffs the air and takes a few steps toward me. Removing a hand from my pocket, I hold it out for him to smell. Luckily, I haven’t been to Nate’s in a while, or he might smell Brutus and be even more untrusting of me.

“Hey, buddy,” I say calmly, letting Frank take his time. He’s mid-thigh height, decent sized for a dog, and that’s a relief. At least Autumn isn’t out there walking a Pomeranian or some weird chi mix.

“Just be careful, he’s really anxious around strangers.”

Autumn sounds like the anxious one, though, as Frank circles around me once with his leash trailing behind. He nudges my hand once, and then starts wagging his tail, jumping up and catching me off guard.

Laughing, I brace us both and give his head a good rub. His mouth falls open, tongue lolling out.

“Hey, Frank. It’s nice to meet you.”

Autumn is staring at the two of us from the apartment door. Her mouth

snaps shut and she reaches for the leash, giving it a gentle tug. Frank gets the hint and walks happily back toward the elevator, tail still wagging.

“Everything okay?” I ask once we’re back in the lobby. She’s staring hard at Frank’s cluelessness, happy sniffing at a potted plant.

“Yeah. I just wasn’t expecting him to be such a traitor.”

That makes me laugh again, and as we head outside, I pry for more information. “Does he usually not like other people?”

She shrugs, breeze shuffling her bangs prettily across her face. “Not really, no. He’s not mean or anything. He’s just...not a people person, I guess.”

“Hmm. We have that in common.”

Autumn chuckles, a smile finally lifting her lips. “Really? How can you run a company like Sharpe Law and not be a people person? You’re in court a few times a month.”

“Eh, that’s just work. I’ve always been good at being charismatic, but the truth is, I definitely prefer my alone time.”

I think of my house, just outside the busy city streets—how it’s empty right now. Unless the cleaning service is there. Loneliness settles inside me and I try to ignore it, Autumn and I walking at a brisk pace to keep up with Frank.

She gives me a quick glance, biting her lip. “I guess I get that. I’m kind of the same way. Even in college, I didn’t really make any friends. Except —”

“Except...?”

I can’t help prompting her. I know so little about this woman, and I want to know so much more. I have no idea why. There’s just something pulling me toward her. She’s a mystery, and the way she looks away now and then, the vague information she’s given me about her ex, her lingerie—I’m beginning to figure her out.

“Except my roommate.”

My brows raise. “Oh, I didn’t know you had a roommate.”

Her cheeks go red in an aggressive blush, darkened by the crisp air. There are more trees lining the street now as we near the park. Two blocks away, maybe three, I see the low stone wall and benches, indicating that we’re close.

“Yeah. City rent and all that.”

Between this comment and the fact that she takes the subway instead of owning a car, money must be a sore subject. So I decide to change it.

“You mentioned college. I, uh, noticed on your resume and transcripts that you have an unusual undergrad degree for a lawyer.”

This gets her smile back, just a hint of it. Frank pauses to sniff a lamppost as Autumn ducks deeper into her jacket.

“Mmm. I got my BA in English. I thought, for a little while, that I wanted to do something else.”

There’s a strange look in her eyes, like she isn’t quite here with me. Sadness hangs in the air for just a second before she shrugs it off and calls to Frank. We’re at the main road now and wait for a break in traffic to cross.

“What did you get yours in?”

I can’t remember the last time someone asked me that question. Grant, maybe, back when we used to talk for hours in between jury selection or late nights spent in the office.

“Philosophy.”

Autumn does a double take, scrunches her nose. “Wait—really?”

“Oh, yeah. It shouldn’t be *too* surprising. Part of being a lawyer is about asking endless questions to get to the truth, right?”

She laughs, head tipping back, light from the streetlamps spilling across her features. The sun is low on the horizon and just barely lighting up the park as we enter it. But there are still groups of people milling about, couples walking arm in arm, squirrels darting across the path.

I wonder if, from a distance, we look like a couple.

If anyone could ever believe that a woman like her could fall for a man like me.

We settle into a comfortable silence as Frank cruises the paths, stopping sporadically to sniff and be curious. He pays particular attention to a hot dog vendor and Autumn’s stomach growls. She blushes again, embarrassed, as I chuckle.

We step onto a wide path that looks familiar, and it takes me a second to realize it’s at the bottom of a hill—the hill Grant and I sit on top of when we catch up now and then. I wish, suddenly, that he was there to give me advice; a silent observer who could whisper in my ear, tell me what to say or do, how to keep her by my side.

I barely know Autumn Cavendish and I’m already terrified of losing her.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks, her voice somehow more girlish now that we’re out of the office. She looks up at me through her lashes, Frank mirroring her with his mouth open again in a happy grin.

I reach out and pet him to try and deflect the emotions washing over me. But still, I can't lie to her; it's impossible.

"Just about Grant. I still see him now and then. We meet there, actually, when I can spare the time."

I tip my chin up the hill, indicating the empty bench at the top. Somewhere behind it, there's a looming oak tree.

"Oh. I didn't realize you two were so close."

She's genuinely surprised, turning in a circle as Frank tangles us in his leash. We do a strange little dance, both of us laughing by the end of it as we get untangled. In the middle of the mess, I take her elbow to help her balance. Once it's all figured out, she doesn't move away, and tucks herself in close enough for my arm to go naturally around her waist.

Frank reaches some indiscernible landmark and turns, following a well-known routine. We start back toward the entrance, a ten-minute walk, at least.

"Grant was a great partner, obviously, but he was more than that." I turn to look at her. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about any of this with anyone at the office. I don't like to bring my private life there."

She nods, eyes on me as I sigh and continue on.

"I didn't...my dad wasn't really around when I was growing up. Or, he was, but he wasn't great, and he left when I was young, so I didn't really have anyone. You know, a male figure to help me figure things out. How to be. How to act." I shrug. "Even just advice on retirement accounts or whatever. My brother and I figured it out for ourselves, but once Grant joined the firm...it was like a puzzle piece clicking into place."

It's easy to talk to her. Too easy. I find myself wanting to spill all of it, all the ache of my childhood, the insecurity of making my own way in the world, and those first few years of the firm.

"When Grant showed up, I was still considering prosecution instead of defense. He called me out on what I really wanted to do, though, which is when Sharpe Law went fully defense. Best change I ever made. Grant's always given me advice when I need it. He's not overbearing; he's not trying to replace my dad. He's just...there."

Silence settles around us again. Did I do the right thing, telling her this? Or was her reassurance a ploy, and she'll head back to the office to tell everyone I'm not as cold-blooded as I put on?

"That sounds nice."

The words are quiet, wistful, and I finally turn to look at her again. She

catches my eye and looks away quickly, the blush from earlier still tinting her cheeks. Frank walks slowly now, having realized we're almost home.

"I...I lost my mom when I was young. So I understand what you mean, about not having that influence around. And my dad tried, but I think losing her devastated him. So it was just me —"

She cuts off abruptly. We're at the main street again and I look around. Did she see her ex? Did I miss something?

Autumn only clears her throat, stepping out of my protection and crossing the street at a brisk pace. I hurry to keep up with her, confused. Did I say something wrong?

"Hey, Autumn. Are you okay?"

She's a few feet ahead of me but lingers as I catch up.

"Yeah. I'm good." There's a false brightness to her words, her smile. Frank corrals in close to her, giving off a worried air as he bumps against her knees. "Sorry, I just...I don't like talking about my family. I just got caught up there."

"It's fine. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up."

She shakes her head as we begin walking again. "No, I volunteered that information. You didn't ask. I'd just, um, like you said—I'd like to keep work and my private life separate from now on. If that's okay."

I nod blindly, caught off guard by her sudden vulnerability and softness. Autumn huddles into her coat again for the rest of the walk back, her brows furrowed and Frank sneaking uneasy looks over his shoulder at her.

Something is off, but I just can't place it. She's telling the truth, but leaving something out.

It's not your place to wonder, that voice in my head warns. It's not your business to know.

As we reach the apartment building, the street now busier with people coming home or heading out for the night, I suddenly wish that it was my business.

Or at least that I was a participant in Autumn's life. Instead of just a boss. A bystander catching glimpses of this woman I can't look away from, this woman I long to know more about.

She gives me a tight smile, thanking me, but the intimate moment we shared earlier is long gone.

I wait until she's inside the foyer. Frank's tail wags low as he looks up at her again, obviously in tune with her feelings.

Too bad dogs can't talk.

Chapter 13

Autumn

I hate to admit it, but with the Wilcox case off my plate, I can focus on other, more important clients. The ones I'm not ashamed to have my name attached to.

Friday is relatively slow, as it's impossible to get documents from outside sources by the end of the day. Saskia is prepping our end-of-year reports for the finance department, which shouldn't be a heavy lift due to how long (or short) I've been with the firm.

Sitting back from a stack of paperwork, I take a second to catch my breath. Two more hours and then I can head home. A flutter of excitement tickles my chest at the thought of being in Chris's car again, discussing the Waters case and little pieces of our lives on the short drive home.

I shouldn't be anticipating being alone with him. I shouldn't want that.

The plan is still on—make partner. Destroy him.

I can do that by gaining his trust. Everything is moving faster than I thought it would, and it feels like I'm tumbling down a rabbit hole. But when he *does* finally trust me with all his secrets, I can show the world what kind of man he really is.

And who is that?

The voice questioning me is sour, defensive. A montage flashes through my mind—Chris focused on Marie Waters's case, Chris holding me after the

flower incident, Chris walking through Central Park with Frank and me, telling me about his family.

He's so different from the cold, ruthless lawyer I always thought he was.

A light knock on the door startles me out of that memory.

"Sorry." Saskia winces. "I was just going to run across the street for an afternoon coffee. Do you want anything?"

Tapping my pen on the desk, I consider the offer. I *could* use a little boost...but no way am I about to ask for just a black coffee from a gourmet café.

"You know what? If you don't mind, I'll come with you. Some fresh air would be nice."



TEN MINUTES LATER, we're out on the street, both of us intent on watching the traffic before we make a run for it. Across the street and two blocks down is Sugar & Spice, a café that's always packed in the morning but is usually quiet about now.

Saskia sighs and pulls back, giving up momentarily. She's put in hard work this past month—I'll have to try and do something about that. Even though I just started here, I should have some say in who gets raises and promotions. If possible, I'd like to keep her on my team when I move up, too.

The blaring sound of a radio going by pulls my attention. My eyes scan the other side of the street automatically, drift over a familiar figure, then slide back.

My heart stops.

Kieran.

Saskia takes a step into the street, a break in the traffic, and I reach out and grip her arm tightly.

"Wait!"

She stumbles, surprised, turning back clumsily.

"Don't. Get back in the building."

Her face goes blank with fear as she follows me, the two of us slipping back into the foyer.

"What's wrong?" She's looking out through the tinted glass, trying to figure out what spooked me. But even if she sets eyes on Kieran, it won't be

obvious.

He looked...good. The thought echoes in my mind even as I try to find a security guard nearby. One is leaning up against the counter, chatting with a receptionist, and I make a beeline for him.

“Excuse me!”

Kieran.

All over again, I get that tight feeling around my throat, like someone squeezing. His hair is longer, not bleached anymore. He’s filled out more. He still has that hollowed-out look to him, though. Years of drug use took his molars and a few other teeth.

“Excuse me, there’s someone...out front...” I trail off, not sure how to explain the situation. “Can you please get ahold of Mr. Sharpe and ask him to come down to the foyer?” I ask the receptionist, turning my attention away from the guard for a second.

He takes my arm, already scanning the large room for threats. “Miss, was someone bothering you? Did they follow you in here?”

“No. It’s not—he didn’t do anything, he just...”

How do I explain this?

He’s just a man who used to abuse me. A man who had complete control over me until—

Until Stephen going to jail gave me the strength to break away.

Until my father’s funeral drained all of my emotional energy.

The security guard relaxes, but adrenaline is still buzzing through my system. What am I going to do if Kieran comes in here?

Saskia has made her way over to the elevators and is watching me warily. I don’t even want to think about what she’ll tell the rest of the team.

The receptionist hangs up the phone and eyes me. She clearly thinks I’m crazy, too, probably because I’m trying not to pant with anxiety. I can’t take my eyes off the front doors, convinced that any moment he’ll walk through.

As the minutes tick by, I try to regulate my breathing. Just as I’m telling myself that I should go back up to my office and get on with the day, stop being so paranoid, the elevator doors open and Chris strides out.

His eyes are dark and hard. They scan the room, land on me, and he’s at my side immediately. He puts out an arm but doesn’t touch me. The security guard and receptionist both catch the move, though, and look interested.

“Autumn. What’s wrong?”

I pull Chris to the side, not wanting to make more of a scene. Once I tell

him, he'll laugh it off. He'll reassure me that it's no big deal, that I probably just mistook someone for my ex.

"It's Kieran. He was outside, across the street. Watching the building."

Now he does touch me. His arm goes to my waist and he beckons the security guard over. All of a sudden, the tall, broad man is obedient, unquestioning.

"There's a man outside," Chris explains quickly in a low voice. "I mentioned to your manager that we may have a problem with him. He's here —"

I zone out as the two go back and forth. The security guard asks questions and Chris answers. His tone is short, direct, and commanding. I'm surprised the discussion is even lasting this long.

"Sorry, sir." Those are the words I hear when my pulse stops rushing through my ears. "There's not much we can do unless he's on our property." The security guard looks uneasy, as if he wants to say, *And you should know that—being a criminal defense lawyer and all.*

Chris grinds his teeth. I see the tendon in his jaw tick with rage. His body is perfectly still, muscles tense.

"Show me."

The words are directed at me. I take him to the plate glass windows and search the other side of the street again, feeling only slightly safe knowing that Kieran won't be able to see me through the tint.

"He was...he was there." I point at the local pharmacy across the street with its neon "open" sign and bench bolted to the concrete.

But Kieran is gone.

Turning, I ignore the fact that there are only inches between us and people watching. "Chris, I swear, he was here. He was watching. It's like... it's like he knew I was going to be there."

He couldn't; there's no way.

Kieran was never that smart. Just lucky.

Chris crowds closer, his chin dipping to speak low, just between the two of us. "He must've been watching from the day he figured out you worked here. I'm sorry, Autumn. I should've done more."

I shake my head. "No. You heard the guard, nothing can be done unless he—" My throat tightens.

I don't even want to think about the possibility of Kieran setting foot on the property.

Of Kieran in the foyer and his twisted grin.

Kieran standing in the doorway of my office.

Kieran's hand wrapping —

“Come on.” He reaches for my elbow and despite the bulldog mode he's in, grips it gently, leading me back toward the elevators. We make the trip back to his office with only a few questioning glances.

Once the door is shut behind us, Chris speaks freely.

“You're staying with me.”

“What?”

It takes longer than it should for the words to sink in. And surprisingly, a part of me doesn't want to fight him.

But he's my boss.

And I'm already too close to him. Too tempted, with this strange tether between us.

Chris is moving around the office, gathering his things. His jaw is set. This is insane.

“Chris, I can't stay with you. That's completely inappropriate —”

“It's not about what's inappropriate or what isn't.”

He steps in front of me, moving in close. His scent envelopes me, calming my nerves. Eyes half lidded, I barely have it in me to be annoyed.

I shouldn't feel safe around him.

“No one has to know.”

The words are a whisper as my eyes are glued to his lips. Swaying forward, a small part of me fights the urge to fall into a kiss.

I just want to drown in him right now. I want him to make me forget...

“I...no. I can't. I have Orla, and Frank, and —”

“Frank can come, too.”

That sends a little jolt to my heart. I press a hand to my chest, surprised at the ache I feel there.

“Go to your desk. Get your things. I'll meet you at the entrance to the garage.”

His dark eyes bore into mine, demanding obedience. It goes against everything in me, but I want to give in.

“We'll discuss it on the ride home.”

He walks out of the room, leaving me alone, but feeling more stable than I was moments before. The thought of Chris being by my side as I leave takes away the edge of panic.

Now I just need to figure out how to stop wanting things I shouldn't crave.



WE'RE COMING to the apartment. Any way you can leave?

As soon as I send it, those three little dots pop up. Orla responds quickly.

WE? Who is we? You are not bringing him here.

Kieran showed up at the office. He was waiting for me outside.

There's a long pause. The car is silent, filled with an air of annoyance, frustration, and smugness. Chris and I just spent the last ten minutes arguing about his proposal.

The smugness is coming from *him*. Unfortunately, he proved his reputation by making excellent points.

If I stay with Chris, Kieran won't know where I am. There will be no threat to Orla. I'll be safer until we figure something out. His private life is fully cut off from his position running the firm, so no one will know I'm there.

And Frank can come.

Why does the fact that he insists on Frank coming along make my heart squeeze? Ugh.

Okay. What's the plan?

With relief, I realize Orla isn't going to have an attitude about this. She hates Sharpe Law as much as I do, but we both know Kieran showing up is the bigger problem here.

I'm going to go away for a while. Not sure how long. Just until it's taken care of.

And Chris coming to the apartment is solving this how...?

He's helping me move my things. Temporarily.

Right. Which is why you're asking me to leave.

I scoff down at my phone, a knot of anxiety forming low in my belly. Okay...maybe Orla knows me too well.

Sounds like you're aiming for some alone time, she teases. Really taking the plan to heart, huh?

Shifting in the seat, I avoid Chris's curious eyes as I type back quickly, **This is serious O. I'll let you know as soon as we're out and I'll keep you**

updated.

She doesn't answer again. When I look up, I realize we're maybe two minutes away from the apartment. Hopefully enough time for Orla to slip out.

Chris parks and before I can even undo my seatbelt, he's halfway around the car. Opening the door, he holds out a hand expectantly. I lift a brow in surprise.

His answering smirk makes desire stir deep down, where I try to tamp it into obedience. *Now is not the time.*

Through the front doors, in the elevator, down the hall...the whole time, I can feel him just behind me. My skin prickles and shivers with anticipation. The key stutters into the lock, and then I push open the door and we step inside.

"Hey, baby," I greet Frank, who wags his tail so hard his whole butt wiggles. He gives me a big grin and bypasses me quickly to sniff at Chris's trousers.

Rolling my eyes at the betrayal, I put down my purse and bite my lip, eyes scanning the apartment. I haven't brought a man here—ever.

And it's just hitting me now that having Chris Sharpe here, in my private space, isn't a good idea.

"Wow. This is..." He trails off, stepping farther into the apartment. I already know what he's thinking. Standing in the entryway, I look completely out of place in my dark skirt and white sweater. My heels click authoritatively as I move into the kitchen, ignoring his surprise.

"My roommate is coming back soon, so we should make this quick. I'll start packing up, just wait there."

Pushing past my anxiety, I head down the hallway and to my bedroom.

Where the hell is my duffle bag? I used to use it for the gym, but don't have time to go anymore. I pull open the closet door and hear a footfall behind me.

Turning quickly, my heart seizes at the sight of Chris in the doorway.

His hooded eyes take in the bedroom. It's all pink floral softness, a sweet vanilla scent lingering in the air, the comforter thick and luscious. Beneath our feet is a dark navy rug embroidered with flowers and birds. Everything is so feminine, so decadent, and so *not* the kind of woman I've presented to the firm.

His eyes find mine. He takes another step into the room, hand ghosting over the comforter as he comes toward me. My mind is whirring, trying to

think of how to explain this, even as my heart crumples inside.

He'll see all this and think I'm weak, frivolous, silly—

“So this is why you always smell so delicious.”

His murmured words send a thrill through me as he comes ever closer. The duffle bag drops from my hand. Chris reaches me and backs me up against the wall, his hands coming to rest on either side of my waist, close enough that I can feel the warmth of him from inches away.

His gaze drags down my body.

“Show me where you keep your lingerie.”

Chapter 14

Chris

Her chest hitches with a breath, and I know it isn't just me thinking about sex. Thinking about her body on mine, those curves pressed up against my hard muscles...and other hard things.

"I..."

Autumn's eyes flit to the door. It's open, the hallway dimly visible. Somewhere out there, the dog huffs and settles down.

It's just the two of us.

"My roommate might come back soon."

Her pink tongue darts out, licks her bottom lip. It's a half lie; from the start, Autumn hasn't wanted anyone to know about us. I doubt she'd bring me here with the chance of the roommate walking in on her boss stalking her around the apartment.

Sizing her up. Wondering what she has on under that tight skirt.

"Are you afraid?" I murmur it, ghosting my lips along her jaw line. Those heels put us at an almost even height. I've got some ideas involving them. "You don't want her to see just how wet I make you?"

My knee is pressed between her legs, the heat of her sex burning through the fabric. I feel the quiver that runs over her thighs. With a smirk, I reach down and hike the hem up farther.

"If I touch you now...are you drenched for me?"

My fingers nudge at her inner thigh, teasing. But I don't touch her yet—no matter how much I want to.

Autumn takes a deep, shuddering breath.

Getting to my knees, I push the hem of the skirt up until her curvy thighs are bare.

There it is—a hint of pink silk, darkened where her slit is already soaked. My heart thunders in my chest, sending blood south in a rush. Taking one leg by her calf, I hook it over my shoulder as she gasps.

And with one last look up, meeting her eyes for a fleeting moment, I bury my face in her sex.

She smells sweet, salty, musky, and my mouth waters. I drag my tongue up the silk. Will her bare skin feel the same?

I need it gone, now, and yank at the thin waistband, catching her off guard so she has to lean back against the wall.

“Oh,” she gasps as the silk comes down, slides from her ankles, and is tossed somewhere behind me.

This room. I had my shit together until I saw this room.

The thought of her sleeping in this luxurious bed, covered in pink, that sweet scent of vanilla and cocoa butter lingering, the knowledge that somewhere in here are other scraps of silk and lace. It's too much.

Wrapping an arm around one of her thighs, I pull Autumn closer again and breathe her in deeply. She makes an embarrassed sound; I don't want her to be self-conscious. Like an animal, I let out a low growl and lap at her, licking her already soaked folds until her hips are tilting against my face and she's letting out muffled cries.

Pulling back just enough, I use a thumb and forefinger to lightly pinch her clit. A shiver goes through her entire body and as I watch, her eyes actually roll back.

Standing abruptly, I smirk at Autumn's dazed pout. Her lifted leg wobbles as she tries to find her balance. I reach out, taking her hands as if to offer help, and instead, tug her toward the bed.

She follows without argument. Her teeth bite into that plump bottom lip.

I press Autumn gently onto the bed. That damn skirt is gathered up around her hips now and with her panties out of the way, her plump pussy is just waiting for me. My tie comes off first, tossed to the side. I don't even make it through all the buttons on my shirt; halfway down, I reach back, pull it up and over my head, tossing it.

The clack of my belt is loud in the room. Autumn sucks in a breath. Her lips are parted, wet, and my cock twitches with the thought that I want inside her mouth. I want to feel her suck me off, I want her to look up at me with those pretty eyes.

But if she's serious about the roommate...

A thrill goes through me. I feel like a teenager again, half dressed, kicking off my pants, hard and aching for her.

"Take that off."

She reaches hesitantly for her sweater.

"I want to bury my face in those pretty tits of yours, Autumn."

A flush covers her cheeks and neck. She fumbles at first, but pulls the shirt off, pink bra straining to keep her breasts under control. Her nipples are hard. The silky fabric matches her panties.

Kneeling on the bed, I climb toward her, capturing those lips in a kiss. She moans against my mouth and leans in eagerly, parting her legs.

I press her back resolutely until she's flat on the bed, her knees braced against my hips. Kissing her harder, her mouth parts for my tongue. It's all wet heat and excruciating satisfaction as my cock slides inside her.

Like she was made for me.

The thought is pure delirium. Autumn and I both moan, her head thrown back, tits shifting as she tries to grind against me.

"You want to fuck me, baby?" I growl, holding still and letting her try to find some friction. She lets out a frustrated whine as I grin down at her wickedly. "Tell me what you want."

Autumn pants, her hips gyrating, eyes glazed over. "Please. I want..." A shiver goes through her and her nipples peak. "I want you to make me come."

"Mmm. I need more than that, Autumn. What do you want? My fingers? My tongue?"

"I want your cock," she breathes out, half pleading as she arches her back.

It's too much temptation. I bury my face in her tits, losing myself to the lush sensation as she wraps her legs around me and pulls me deeper, letting out a moan.

"Like this?" I gasp, starting to thrust slowly, our bodies pressed together tightly.

Her hands are everywhere—roaming my back, gripping my shoulders, my ass.

“Yes. Please, Chris, just like *that*.”

Autumn’s breathing picks up with pleasure as I lose myself in the sensations of her. Her plush skin, hot core, the swell and jiggle of her breasts pressed against me.

I could do this forever, I think blindly, one hand gripping her hip to hold her still while I fuck into her. *I could lose myself in this woman*.

It’s a dangerous thought, but I let it go, unwilling to be anywhere other than in this moment. Autumn crying out beneath me; the overwhelming wave of emotion and dizzying desire; the satisfaction in feeling closer to anyone than I have in a long time.

It’s everything I’ve been wanting. Even if I won’t admit it to myself.



THE NEXT MORNING, Saturday, the street outside her apartment is busy. Couples and groups of friends stroll toward Central Park. Customers pop in and out of the few businesses nearby, a nail salon and a small convenience store.

I’m parked outside again, probably illegally, waiting.

Waiting gives me too much time to think.

What the hell am I doing? Is this really a good idea—having the woman I’m obsessed with move in with me?

It’s just temporary, the cool, calm, and collected lawyer persona reassures me. *Necessary. Wouldn’t want her crazy ex getting to her, would you?*

It hits me in this moment that I’m not too far off from Kieran, her ex... after all, we’re both obsessed with Autumn. What’s keeping me from becoming him?

It’s an itch I can’t scratch, learning more about him. I want to ask, want to know so many things. Was she in love with him? How long were they together? Is there any chance, any chance at all, that she’d give in and go back to him?

No, that’s ridiculous. She’s scared. Which is the only reason she agreed to this crazy idea.

I look up through the passenger window and see the woman herself striding out of the apartment building with her chin raised and her eyes cold. But there’s an edge of uncertainty to her, too.

In the backseat of my car, Frank whines. At least I'm not the only one making puppy dog eyes at her.

She opens the door, slides in, carefully places a bag in the back, and smiles at Frank.

"Is that everything?" I ask, clearing my throat gruffly.

Last night is a haze, a whirlwind, a dream. *You just fucked.* That lawyer voice is back and it's annoying. *Get over it.*

That's what's nagging me, though. As much as I love the dirty talk and stripping Autumn down to the little pink scraps of clothing she hides under her business attire, it was more than just fucking. To me, at least.

Was it for her, too?

Another question to add to the pile.

Whatever it was for her, it was distracting enough for Autumn to forget a few things. I slept fitfully last night, knowing she was just two doors away in my guest bedroom. After an awkward coffee this morning, she asked if I could bring her back to round up the rest of what she'd need.

Trying not to react to the painful twinge of tension in my shoulders, I throw the car in drive and head back through Manhattan, toward home.

It's a longer drive than usual with the weekend traffic. Autumn gets out, wrangles Frank out of the back seat, and turns to glance up at my house with a small frown. This is the first time she's seeing it in daylight. I pocket my keys and give the house a quick appraising glance, trying to see it through her eyes.

It's blocky, modern, dark. Not as ostentatious as Nate's place in the country or as quaint as Jenson's Cambridge home. No, this is a creation of my own—mostly for show. It *looks* like a billionaire lawyer's home. Intimidating. All clean lines, glass, and the black front door.

I follow Autumn up the front steps and reach around her, trying to ignore the way her ass grazes my dick, as I unlock the door.

Frank slips easily from her grasp with a shake of his head. "Hey!" she calls out, but he's already gone.

Last night, the dog was confused and tired, too. He followed Autumn into the guest bedroom and went completely unnoticed. Now it seems he's found his energy again.

He does a loop of the large living area, then trots back toward us, mouth open in a grin. I can't help grinning back.

"What do you think, boy?"

As if my words are encouragement, Frank lopes off toward the kitchen and dining room behind it.

“Sorry. He’s a little excited.”

Autumn looks nervous. I can guess why. She’s wearing a comfortable-looking jersey dress that hugs her curves. The neckline shows off the tops of her luscious breasts, and it’s a gorgeous champagne color. My mind goes to all the other ways I could cover her with champagne, and I shake it off.

“It’s no problem. There’s not really anything he can get into.”

As the bland words leave my mouth, I look around and realize just how true they are.

My place is...minimalist.

The furniture is sharp-edged, definitely not kid-friendly, and most of the artwork on the walls is dark and expensive. Autumn is looking around curiously, stepping onto a lush black rug, looking like a star in the night sky.

“So it’s just you here.”

It’s not a question. My shoulders slump marginally. Over the past few years, Grant has made a few comments here and there—it’s why he pushes me toward seeing my family more.

Family.

I latch onto the thought and eagerly offer up, “I’m the only one that lives here, but my brothers and their wives visit often.” Not much recently, though, with how distracted I’ve been, but Autumn doesn’t need to know that. “Their kids, too.”

She turns and raises her eyebrows, a smile quirking her lips. “Kids? You’re an uncle?” I can tell she’s trying to imagine it—the coldhearted lawyer as an uncle. Kids running around all these sharp edges and glass.

“Yeah. I have two nieces and a nephew, actually.”

The tension leaves her body as she wanders farther into the house and I follow. She saw most of the place last night and this morning fleetingly. The kitchen, she’s familiar with, as well as the guest bedroom and attached bathroom. Now she looks around the living area curiously and dips into the dining room as Frank rounds the corner to disappear elsewhere.

“What’s upstairs?” She points. I shrug.

“Not much. A home office. A balcony, of sorts.”

Her head tilts in curiosity. “A balcony?”

“Here, I’ll show you.”

Up the stairs, take a right, slide open the doors.

“Oh my God. Chris, this is gorgeous.”

My face heats. With pleasure, or embarrassment?

Autumn walks out onto the balcony, which is more of a porch, or a giant outdoor seating area. It takes up half of the second story of the house—all stained wood, live plants, an outdoor firepit, and a small bar.

“Thank you. It’s more enjoyable in spring and summer, I have to say.”

There’s a large wall of windows that looks in on my home office, also rarely used. It’s hitting me just how impersonal and cold my home feels, and self-consciousness is sinking in.

Why? It’s not like I’ve never brought women home before.

This is different. She’s not one of those women. She’s not just staying the night.

Autumn is grinning, leaning against the railing as she looks out at a few other scattered houses and the wooded area beyond. A park, a relatively quiet one, that people hike or picnic at. Maybe I should take her there. I’ve never been, myself.

She turns and gives me a shy smile. That dress...the way it clings to her curves is making it hard for me to think. I follow her mindlessly back into the house, down the stairs.

“Where’s Frank?”

She frowns, checking the living room and kitchen. I duck into the main bathroom and then the guest room. Not there.

Autumn lets out a huff and marches farther down the hallway. There’s only one other option...

The door to my bedroom is slightly ajar. I see her hesitate for a second before touching the handle. A rush of hot adrenaline goes through me at the thought of Autumn in my bedroom.

On my bed.

Legs spread beneath me.

Shaking the thought off, I look over her shoulder as she pushes the door open.

Frank, snuggled into a tight ball on *my* bed, looks up as if we’ve interrupted his nap.

“Frank!”

His tail thumps against the navy comforter. Autumn is blushing, biting her lip with her arms crossed. It’s adorable, and I can’t help the deep laugh that escapes me.

“It’s fine, really. Probably one of the better bedmates I’ve had.”

She lets out a little huff. “I don’t want him to feel *too* at home.” Her narrowed eyes dart back to the dog, who’s tucked his head back into his paws and has his eyes half open.

“Jealous?” I ask with a grin.

She glares up at me. In her flats, I’ve got a few inches on her. We’re still in the doorway, and I can’t help looming forward, wanting to see if...

There it is. That shiver that straightens her shoulders, arches her breasts toward me.

So I’m not the only one still affected. Good to know.

“Can we talk for a minute?”

The words slip out and I’m immediately ticked off at myself. *Why* would I ruin this moment?

Her smile drops away, a suspicious look on her face. “O-kay.”

We head back to the kitchen where I offer her a coffee, which she turns down with a scrunched nose. Thinking back to the first day we met, I ask with a sly smirk, “Hot chocolate?”

The blush that colors her cheeks gives her away. She shifts uncomfortably on the high stool before giving in with a roll of her eyes.

“I highly doubt you have hot chocolate here. This house is like a museum.”

Trying to ignore the arrow right to my heart, I reach into a ceramic container and pull out a packet of luxury hot chocolate mix. Autumn’s face brightens immediately, her eyes questioning.

“Nieces and nephew, remember?”

She tries to suppress her pleasure, but can’t, and I grin openly as I start my coffee and heat up milk for the hot chocolate.

“So...how old are your nieces and nephew?”

“Well, my older brother has two daughters—Eva and Roux. Roux is only a few months old, so she skips the hot chocolate. My younger brother has a son. Milo. He’s a little over a year old. Eva is the hot chocolate hound, if I’m being honest.”

I pass the mug over and she smiles, wrapping her hands around it for the warmth.

“I didn’t realize. You don’t have any pictures of them at the office, and you haven’t mentioned them before.”

I shrug my shoulders uncomfortably. “Yeah. I like to keep work and

family separate. Makes things easier.”

Autumn’s eyes suddenly get a faraway look. She sits up, holding the mug close, almost protectively.

“So what did you want to talk about?”

The change of topic and hard edge to her voice take me by surprise. One hand on the cool countertop, I look at her closely. It doesn’t matter how intimate we’ve been; I still can’t figure out Autumn Cavendish.

“I need you to tell me more about Kieran. Why he’s following you and looking for you. I need to know more about him and your relationship with him.”

Can she hear the tinge of jealousy in the question? I straighten up, too, suddenly feeling like I’m in a courtroom.

Autumn’s face is impassive. “There’s not much you need to know. We dated when I was younger; it wasn’t a good relationship. I’m assuming he wants to try and get back together. Or something.”

The lame ending tips me off.

“You’re lying.”

Her face flushes, this time not a blush, but embarrassment and panic.

“No, I’m not. Kieran and I...we dated when I was a teenager. He was...it wasn’t a good relationship. I told you.”

“What does that mean, exactly, Autumn? What did he do to you?”

Her body tightens the way it did that day in the office with the flowers. She’s shutting down, closing herself off. But I need answers.

“I can’t help you if I don’t know what happened.”

“I don’t *need* your help!”

The angry outburst echoes in the sudden silence. Both of us are acutely aware of the fact that she’s in *my* house. That she can’t go back to her apartment because this man is stalking her; that she’s afraid.

But she won’t say it out loud. She won’t admit it.

Autumn puts the mug down and pushes it away, standing.

“I’m not one of your clients, Chris. I’m your employee.”

The words are like a bucket of ice. Everything that’s happened between us—all the trust, the intimacy, the overwhelming emotions of last night in her bed—they’re all washed away in this moment.

“If you can’t respect my boundaries, I’ll find a hotel. I appreciate you letting me stay here, but maybe it’s not such a good idea.”

She turns to walk away and I reach over the counter, suddenly terrified of

losing her.

“Autumn. Wait.”

Her skin is warm under my fingertips. Whatever tethers us together, that string of fate, twinges as her cold eyes meet mine.

“I’m sorry.”

There’s a flash of hurt and distrust in her eyes. My heart sinks. Maybe I *am* more like her ex than I want to admit.

“Stay, please. I won’t ask any more questions. I just want you to be safe.”

For a second, I’m sure she’ll say no. Pack up her things, call a cab, and leave. Go somewhere where I won’t see her anymore. Distance herself from me.

But instead, she gently pulls her wrist out of my grasp. “Okay,” she says quietly.

That’s all I need.

Her. Here.

Safe with me.

Chapter 15

Autumn

Is it horrible? Does he have a dungeon? A list of rules you have to follow?

Ha ha. I type back, making a face at my phone. Chris is out somewhere, but that doesn't matter; I'm holed up in the guest bedroom, legs tucked beneath me on the bed, texting Orla. **No rules. But his house is pretty... bare.**

Maybe that's an exaggeration. He has art on the walls and plates in the cabinets. There's no sign of who he *is*, though. And a part of me longs to know more about Chris Sharpe.

To get revenge, that uncertain voice in my head whispers. *Right?*

My gut twists with guilt. I do still want revenge; I want to get him back for putting Stephen in prison. For the things my brother has had to endure there, will still have to endure.

Our conversation from yesterday comes back, or at least a part of it, before it blew up in my face. *Eva and Roux. Milo.*

He has a family. Why didn't I think of that possibility?

Because he hides it so well. He hides everything. Which means he has secrets.

If the "secret" is that he's a doting uncle, I'm in trouble. I can't tell Orla about how my heart aches when he talks about his nieces and nephew. I can't

admit that I fell head over heels when he whipped out a hot chocolate stash. Or when Frank curled up on his bed.

“Traitor,” I mutter, nudging my dog, who only opens an eye to give me a baleful look.

I get it, though. I’ve been tempted by the thought of burying myself in those sheets, Chris’s scent surrounding me, lulling me...

Unsurprising, considering that his entire focus is on destroying people’s lives in court.

Damn. Orla isn’t giving him an ounce of slack here. With a sigh, I wonder what the heck I should get up to today. It’s Sunday and quiet. The neighborhood Chris lives in is wealthy for sure, with privacy fences or acres of land separating the houses.

Maybe I should take Frank out for a walk. Let him sniff to his heart’s content.

So...what did he make of your out-of-office attire?

I can practically see Orla’s smirk as I read the text and roll my eyes. My face heats in a blush. Another line of Chris’s from yesterday comes back — *I like to keep work and family separate. Makes things easier.*

I get where he’s coming from. Unfortunately, for me, work and family are intertwined, but work and my personal life? My comfort outside of the firm? That’s a different story.

My gaze slips over to the duffle bag of clothes I packed, as well as another stuffed backpack. I have no idea how long I’ll have to be here... hopefully not *too* long, but there’s no way to know. It’s not like I can ask Kieran what the hell he wants or how long he’s going to be stalking me.

An explosion of pink, white, coral, lavender, mauve, and pearl peek out of the bags. Sweat pants, crop tops, and lingerie.

Why can’t I just have normal, boring, comfortable underwear? At least a few pairs.

My clit twinges at the reminder of what I’m wearing right now. Lace underwear that rub insistently at my core and a matching bra. I can’t help wondering what expression would be on Chris’s face if he saw...

No. Definitely not.

I took Orla’s advice, messed around with him, and I obviously have his attention now. He’s offered to let me stay here indefinitely.

I just want you to be safe.

Another twinge, this time deep in my gut. When was the last time

someone said those words to me?

Easy answer — never. I've been looking out for myself since my parents died and Stephen got locked up. And Kieran? The last thing he was worried about was my safety.

Does Chris mean it? Or is he just hoping for another roll in the hay?

My phone vibrates and I pick it up again.

Okay, all jokes aside...be careful please.

A soft smile slips out. Orla can be a hard ass, and hates Chris Sharpe almost as much as I do, but she's genuinely worried about me.

Don't worry, I type back, already missing chatting with her in our living room. **He's got a few frying pans at least. I'll keep one under my pillow.**

It's a joke, but only half a joke. Taking a quick look around the guest bedroom, I try and figure out what *could* realistically be used as a weapon. Not that Kieran could ever get in here—Chris, unsurprisingly, has a state-of-the-art security system that I now have the code to. I'm not too worried.

The room is actually pretty cute, considering the rest of the house. Maybe it has to do with his family. I wonder if they ever stay over here...where they live. If the kids love coming to see Uncle Chris or if he's a bore.

I highly doubt it; the hot chocolate alone sucked me right in.

Leaning back on the queen-size bed, I take in the matte white dresser and nightstands, as well as the beautiful but simple doors to the walk-in closet. Another set of doors—white again—leads to a decent sized bathroom. No tub, only a shower, but I've never really had the luxury of a bathtub, anyway. Who has the time? Or the money? All that hot water.

Actually, now that I'm focused *in* the moment, it hits me that this room contrasts starkly with the rest of the house. Everything else, including Chris's bedroom, is dark in color. Dark wood or paint. Blacks, navy, woody browns, and forest greens. This bedroom, though, is creams and whites with a hint of gray-blue. Calming.

I actually *do* feel safe here. It's frustrating but comforting at the same time.

The past few days have been so exhausting that I lay back and curl up around Frank, fully intent on taking a nap.

Instead, the rest of yesterday's tension-fraught conversation comes back to me.

I can't help you if I don't know what happened.

Unbidden, a tear slips down my cheek, into the curve of my ear. I wipe it

away angrily and blink my eyes open.

Kieran. What a mess. What a nightmare. I've worked so hard, let memories of him slip away over the years.

And now he's back.

Chris, true to his reputation, caught my lie. As much as I want to believe it—because it would be the lesser of two evils—there's no way Kieran is here to win me back.

When I broke things off with him, he went down fighting. I was surprised. In the weeks that followed Stephen's trial and sentencing, Kieran and I barely interacted. He disappeared. Right when I needed someone, which wasn't surprising, but was still disappointing. His noticeable absence made me sure that he wouldn't even spare me a second glance when I told him I was leaving...

Luckily, I trusted my instincts and didn't tell him *where* I was leaving to. Law school. Down south, where I got in on an almost full ride and could get away from my roots, becoming the woman I needed to be to help my brother.

Somewhere in the house, a door opens.

Panic races through my veins.

With Kieran's face still in my mind, I illogically think it could be him.

But then Chris calls out.

"Autumn, I grabbed dinner on my way back. I don't know what you like to eat. Hope you don't mind pub food."

His words, and footsteps, fade away as he goes somewhere else—upstairs, maybe? It's cold today, and windy, the leaves rattling on the trees. I imagine him standing on the outdoor patio chilled to the bone, and my heart aches.

The past flashes back, interrupting my sadness and replacing it with anxiety. Kieran's raised voice when I told him I was leaving. The slap that cracked across my cheek. His hand on my throat, right before I hit him over the head with an empty beer bottle and ran.

If he's back here for me, it's not because he loves me. It's something more dangerous than that.

No. Don't go back there.

I pull myself out of the memories and sit up, shaking them off like water on a raincoat.

"Here boy."

I get up, fill Frank's food bowl, check that he has water. It's late—a little

past 6 p.m. My stomach roils, with nerves or hunger, I'm not sure, but I step out of the bedroom, determined to live in the moment instead of in the past.

Standing in the hallway, I listen, trying to pinpoint where in the house Chris is. Maybe I can ask him about the Waters case. Take my mind off things. I want to forget, and that draws me farther down the hall, toward the sound of...a shower.

Chris's bedroom door is ajar. It always is, and I wonder if privacy doesn't matter much to him. He's here alone all the time, though. He doesn't seem uncomfortable with me being in his space.

I slip through the door, taking in the large room again. Big windows looking out on a perfectly manicured hedge garden that blocks the neighbor's yard and view. A king-size bed, dark comforter, plush pillows, the wood floor warm beneath my bare feet as I tiptoe in.

A frisson of *want* wells through me. Unlike the last time, at my apartment, I don't try to stop it.

I'm finally admitting that I need Chris Sharpe.

The bathroom door is also ajar, steam playing at the edges of the room. Pushing the door open, my desire only deepens as I see his silhouette in the hazy room.

Through glass doors littered with water droplets, his muscled body is barely visible. He's leaning with both hands against the opposite wall—water spraying over his broad shoulders and down his tapered waist, to the dimples just over his ass.

I bite my lip, warmth flooding my core, and shut the door behind me.

The *click* catches his attention. He turns quickly, soaked hair spinning droplets out like a crown, his dark eyes on me.

"Autumn."

My name is a low rumble in his throat. He doesn't seem surprised, and that only thrills me more. Without a word, I start stripping off my clothes—the oversized T-shirt I have on, the light gray sweatpants, the cream panties underneath. My breasts swing free of the shirt and his gaze drops to them.

I step toward the shower and Chris opens the glass door, making room for me, which isn't hard. The shower space could easily be a small room in its own right. I'm just out of reach of the spray with more than enough room to move and stay dry, but instead, our eyes locked, I step under the water.

It pours down my back in warm rivulets that make me shudder. Chris keeps his distance, a foot between us, his expression wary as he takes in my

naked, wet body.

Catching sight of his body wash, I open it and breathe in the scent of *him*. I want it all over me.

The creamy soap drips down my chest, breasts, and stomach, foaming as I rub it in leisurely, tipping my head to the side and closing my eyes. The water still rushes over my body, washing it away, leaving trails of bubbles.

Chris curls his lips.

He follows the rivulets down to the apex of my thighs. Just as he moves to get on his knees, I reach out and put a hand on his chest.

“No.”

He freezes.

A small surge of power goes through me. I’ve never felt in control of a man like this, not outside of the court room, but Chris watches me with eager eyes.

In this moment, I’m sure he’d do anything I tell him to.

“It’s my turn.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but I kneel in front of him and look up, raking my hair back. It’s soaked, plastered to my lips and neck.

Chris swallows and nods.

He stands with his feet braced apart, cock already stiffening just inches from my lips. My mouth waters at the thought of having him like this. I’m out of the spray of water, but the air is warm and moist, enveloping me, making me feel both protected and bare as he reaches out to touch me.

His fingers follow the line of my jaw. He takes my chin in hand and stares down at me with those eyes like pools of darkness.

My breath quickens. Already, with just a tease of his touch, my pussy is wet. I tilt my hips back, wanting friction, wanting to touch myself.

Instead, I reach out and brace myself on his muscled thighs. I let my lips ghost over the head of his cock and it bounces, throbbing toward me. Tongue poked out between my lips, I take his shaft in hand and lightly lick at the tip, running it over my lips and cheeks.

Chris inhales sharply. With one hand, he leans against the wall over my head. The other barely grazes my shoulder, like he’s afraid to touch me.

I can feel the pulse of blood against my palm as I work him slowly, the water creating a frustrating kind of friction for us both. Rubbing my thighs together, I lean forward and take him in my mouth, bobbing forward until the first few inches of him are slick with my saliva.

He's the perfect size. I *want* to do this, I want to please him, and that feeling is thrilling. It only makes me more wet and I moan around the head of his cock before dipping forward again, letting him hit the back of my throat, hearing his low groan.

The tiles beneath my knees are hard, but slippery in places. After a few seconds, the thought that I might lose my balance distracts me, so I dig my fingers into Chris's ass and use his hard body as leverage to work my mouth over him again and again. With each lick and suck, he gets harder, throbs more insistently, starts muttering and saying things that don't quite make sense. I'm only half listening, though, lost to the satisfaction of pleasuring him, wanting more of the salty drops I lick from the tip.

"Mmm," I hum around him, finally giving in to the need to touch myself. My thighs part and I reach between my legs, running two fingers over my already slick clit.

"Oh, fuck. If you keep doing that Autumn, this isn't going to last long."

My shoulders straighten with pride as he leaks more precum, tongue lapping at him as I rub at the aching bud between my legs. When I look up at him with tears in my eyes, his mouth is open, eyes glued to my every move. I drag my tongue up the base of his shaft, following the thick vein that runs up his cock, and suck the tip with a *pop*. He groans and fists my hair loosely, guiding the angle and rhythm so I can focus on the pleasure pulsing through my body.

With a muffled whine, my eyes close, fingers working furiously at my clit. I've *never* come while sucking a guy off before, but there's something about this—about getting on my knees for Chris and seeing just how undone he becomes—that sends me over the edge.

The orgasm rolls through me and I suck hard, pulling back and moaning around Chris's cock as his hips rock into me. I tighten the grip around the base and feel a throb as he comes, a salty rope of semen coating my mouth while I ride my fingers.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," Chris moans over me, hips stuttering to shallow thrusts. I pull back, panting, cum running from the corner of my mouth.

Chris wipes it away as he gazes down at me. His cock is still throbbing, dark and glistening with my spit.

Carefully, he helps me up from my shaky knees. His arm wraps around my waist as he leans us back, my back to the cool wall and warm water coursing down his shoulders and arms to run over my lower body.

He buries his face in my neck.

As we catch our breath under the water, the feel of his hair tickling my neck freezes me with realization.

What if this is *more* for him?

What if I've played my part too well, and Chris's focus is entirely on me now.

What if he's falling for me.

Chapter 16

Chris

A secret like this is a strange thing to keep.

Every day, I drive us in to work. Late, usually, or very early—so no one sees Autumn slip out of my car. So no one sees the way I stare after her, half in love.

But it's a secret we *have* to keep. It's good that we haven't touched each other since Sunday. Monday and Tuesday would've been bad enough with her fingerprints still littering my body, reminding me of the things she's done to me, the way she makes my world implode.

Her lips wrapped around me, fingers digging in to my muscles, the way her eyes watered as she looked up at me.

It wouldn't look good if anyone at the firm knew that Autumn is living with me. Already I can hear Grant's voice in my head, warning me and tsk-tsking.

But what else was I supposed to do? She has no family, at least no one she's mentioned. Only her roommate, whom she doesn't want caught up in this.

I can't just leave her.

“What do you think?”

The robotic buzz of the line draws me back to my office. I blink back to reality. Shit. I really should've been listening. This DA is not someone I want

to annoy.

“Sorry, Cheryl, can you say that one more time? You cut out.”

A white lie. It won't hurt anyone, but it highlights the bigger falsehood in the room. Cheryl Moran has been a DA in southern Connecticut for over a decade now, and we have a good working relationship. I don't need her to start doubting my dedication. Like Grant, she's an invaluable resource and sounding board.

“I said, I think you need to dig harder with McCarty's ex-wife.” Cheryl's voice has a cutting edge to it; she knows I wasn't paying attention. “There's a reason marriages end, and I'm guessing it has something to do with his preferences in the bedroom. If you can get her to talk about what his kinks are...”

My gut roils in protest. The last thing I want to get into is what kind of things Reid McCarty asked of his ex-wife in the bedroom. But Cheryl's right—it might be a way in.

“Alright. I'll have the detective take another go at her, maybe tomorrow or Friday if our schedules line up. Sorry Cheryl. I've got a lot on my plate right now.”

She sounds amused and curious when she answers. “Haven't you always, Chris? What's changed? You seem stressed.”

“It's more of a personal problem I'm dealing with. You know I like to keep work and home life —”

“Separate,” she says dryly. “I know. Well, whatever it is, try to maintain a balance for now. You can't let it get the better of you with a case like this going on.”

I mumble in agreement, annoyed with myself. We hang up and I sit back, musing over Cheryl's advice.

She's right; it's not as if I haven't juggled a few disgusting, gut-wrenching cases over the years. But I've always done it well and handled it professionally.

What's different this time?

Personal.

It's getting personal. Makes sense, since my mind has been on Autumn all day—mostly on the way she's been ignoring me around the office. Avoiding me, even.

As if I haven't seen her dip down a different hallway when I'm coming.

Frustratingly, Marty is doing the exact opposite. Less than a year now to

choose who I'll have as my partner. My chest aches with the thought of the decision.

With a glance at the clock, I realize just how late it is and get down to business. An hour left before I head out and pick Autumn up in a far corner of the garage. Her idea, which I don't like, because even with security, I'm not convinced that Kieran couldn't get into the garage if he wanted to.

With a sigh, I dial the detective's number and pull up my schedule for the rest of the week.



FIVE THIRTY COMES QUICKLY.

I pull the car around a corner and idle, the hum of the engine almost calming when I don't see her right away.

But then she steps out of the shadows. Long, thick legs in a mid-length wine-colored dress. Gray cardigan over the top to make it more work appropriate, but as Autumn approaches the car, my eyes track the movement of her curves.

She gets in, shuts the door, and takes a deep breath.

Shit. Something big is coming.

"I need you to do me a favor," she says, looking over at me. Her eyes are heavy lidded, her voice quiet and almost meek.

"Anything."

It's out of my mouth before I can stop it. My jaw flexes. I don't need her knowing just how bad I have it. It might only push her further away.

Autumn blinks, her expression softening. But there's still a tense atmosphere in the car as I let off the brake and roll toward the exit.

"I need a ride to Fishkill tomorrow morning."

The garage gate goes up, but my car doesn't move.

I stare across the center console at her.

She's not looking at me now, but I see her swallow nervously. "Are we going?" she asks, eyes darting in my direction.

A horn sounds behind us. The gate starts to rumble and I hit the gas, jerking us out into the street.

"Fishkill. You mean the prison."

It's an old prison, built back in the '70s. A lot of original buildings.

Multi-level security.

“For a case?”

We both know that I know what caseload Autumn and the rest of my senior associates are working with. There’s no one on her roster that would bring her to Fishkill Correctional Facility.

She shakes her head and lets out a short exhausted sigh. “Chris, you can take me or not, but I need you...I need you to not ask questions about this.” Her expression looks pained. Like she’s agonizing over something. “I’m sorry. I can’t tell you more than that.”

We’re at a stoplight, and I stare ahead at the line of crawling traffic, trying to make sense of it.

Trying to make *myself* see sense.

What would Grant say?

It feels like my heart is being yanked in two different directions. She’s so secretive, and I don’t understand why. After everything I’ve shared with her, after everything we’ve done, after the way I very clearly feel about her...she still doesn’t trust me.

“Okay.”

And when she looks at me in surprise and relief, I know that I’m in too deep.

I’d do anything for this woman.

No questions asked.

Chapter 17

Autumn

“And you’re not worried that anyone is going to get suspicious?” Orla asks flatly. “You and the boss, both off for a day...you really don’t think anyone will notice that *coincidence*?”

Her voice is like acid.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Orla. I need to go see him. I can’t miss a week, he’ll get suspicious, and —”

“And you’re telling me Chris Sharpe isn’t suspicious about your request to *drive you out to a correctional facility two hours away*?”

No, I want to tell her. That’s not completely true, though. It would be insane if he wasn’t suspicious. I’m sure he is. He’s just respecting my wishes.

Doing what I asked, which is not asking questions.

But if I tell her that, she’ll start second-guessing how exactly this all fits into the plan.

“I’m just saying. It’s crazy. You’re bringing the man who put your brother in prison to the prison while you visit him. That’s a little twisted, Autumn.”

I swallow hard, throwing down my hairbrush and glaring into the mirror. I don’t know who I’m more upset with, myself or Orla.

“Listen, if this is because you don’t want to come over and let Frank out, I can find —”

She cuts me off. “No. It’s fine. I have no problem doing that, I just think you should...step outside the box and look at the decisions you’re making. That’s all.”

I exhale, trying to let my frustration go with the breath. Things feel tense between Orla and me and it’s hard. She’s my best friend. She’s been with me since day one, fully supportive of this insane idea that *no one else*, including my brother, knows about.

And it feels like I’m losing that support.

Can’t blame her, though. It does look crazy. I’m living with the man I plan on destroying. The man who put my brother in prison twelve years ago. And now, I’m bringing him right to my brother’s proverbial front door.

“It’ll be fine,” I say, although I don’t know if I’m reassuring myself or Orla.

The front door opens and I hurriedly drop what I was doing. “Hey, I have to go. He’s back.”

A few moments later, Frank bounds into the room looking happy and exhausted. Chris insisted on taking him for a jog around the neighborhood, and I am fully *not* prepared to see my boss leaning in the doorway in sweats and a T-shirt.

God, he looks good.

Want pulses through me and I tamp it down, turning back to my purse and making sure everything is inside. Which is almost nothing, except for my ID and some money. Can’t bring much in with you past the guards.

“Ready?”

Chris gives me a lazy grin. “Yeah. Just let me change, then we can get going.”



BY THE TIME we reach Beacon, NY, it’s just after 9 a.m. I dozed on the drive up and blink awake, confused, and immediately scared.

We shouldn’t be here. Chris can’t know—

Then it all comes rushing back, and I take a deep breath to calm myself, casting my eyes around the visitor’s lot. There’s no way Kieran would show up here, right? If he was going to, I think I would’ve seen him by now.

“You’ll stay here?”

Chris nods, looking every bit relaxed in a clean shirt and jeans. But I see the tick in his jaw as he smiles.

I slip out of the seat and head toward the facility, double-checking that I have everything. I check in, give Stephen's DIN number, get patted down and waved through a metal detector, and nod along to the brusque instructions.

Hands above the table at all times.

No hugging.

No passing anything.

The visitation room is large, a bare room with white metal tables and stools attached. Guards are stationed here and there to watch. Already some visitors and inmates are chatting, and as I enter, I see them let Stephen through a door in the back.

I smile tightly as he meets me at a table, trying to keep my eyes from watering. Twelve years and I still almost cry when he comes walking out in that jumpsuit.

"You look good."

It isn't a lie, not exactly, but he could look *better*. His head is shaved—not a cut he ever would've had on the outside—and he's leanly muscled. But there's a bounce to his step that's new, and as we sit down, he starts to tell me about the dog training program they let him join last week.

Just as I'm starting to settle into listening to his animated story, he stops short and stares over my shoulder.

"Autumn."

The flat tone of his voice is too similar to Orla's this morning, and guilt sweeps through me. I already know what I'll find when I turn around.

How am I messing up this badly? How did it all get off track?

I look over my shoulder and see Chris. He hasn't moved into the room, but stays near the far wall, hands in his pockets and face somber.

His eyes lock with mine. Stephen breathes out through his nose and stands. I follow quickly, knee banging on the edge of the metal table with a zing of pain.

Stephen walks casually over to Chris. His legs are so long, longer than mine, and I stop halfway there, bracing for the confrontation.

Instead, Stephen just holds out a hand.

"Sharpe."

There's a tense moment when even a guard nearby is watching with narrowed eyes. Then Chris reaches out and clasps Stephen's hand. They

don't shake, exactly, but it feels like there's some kind of understanding there.

My brother murmurs quietly. I can't hear what he's saying, but Chris follows him back to the table and I do as well, feeling helpless.

It seems like the entire world is crumbling down around me. But it's not going how I expected—this isn't apocalyptic. In fact, it's very much the opposite of what I imagined would happen.

"I'm assuming you two came together?" Stephen asks casually as we all sit. My eyes dart to Chris and his rigid shoulders, expression impassive.

The coldhearted lawyer. He's the man I always thought he was and I can't read him at all.

"Yes. I gave her a ride up from the city."

Stephen nods as if that's perfectly reasonable, while inside, I'm screaming. His eyebrow flicks up as he glances my way.

"Thanks. I keep telling her she needs to get a car."

"I was surprised she didn't have one when she started working at the firm."

There it is. The look on Stephen's face as if I slapped him. His skin goes pale, sickly, as he looks from Chris to me.

"I don't have much longer," he lies. We've barely spent fifteen minutes together. "Do you mind if we..."

Chris's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Of course. I'll be out front, Autumn, whenever you're ready."

The men share a look. I have no idea what's behind it, but it doesn't seem to be hate. Stephen obviously recognizes Chris—how could he forget the face of the man who prosecuted him?

But does that mean Chris remembers Stephen? How could he, after almost a decade? And a career change to defense?

What are the chances?

Chris walks calmly out of the visitation area, chatting with the guards, and I turn back to my brother. Heart pounding.

"So you're working for Sharpe now."

"It's..."

"What?" He laughs. "Not what it looks like? So *this* is why you didn't want to tell me anything about the new job." Stephen sighs and leans forward, looking too tall, too thin, and tired. "Were you worried I'd be mad, sis? I could never be."

His eyes are full of regret. He looks much older than he is—forty, but the years hang heavy on him.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. My stomach is squirming with nausea, horror washing over me in waves. I wish I hadn’t pissed Orla off this morning. I wish I had someone to call and talk to about this, to pour out how scared I am, how guilty I feel.

“I hope you aren’t doing this to try and get me out.”

His voice is hard, serious, and I haven’t heard that tone before. It’s the voice of someone who spends every day in a correctional facility.

“I’m not,” I scoff, lifting my chin. “Nothing is going to get you out of here, Stephen.”

Because we can’t prove that he *didn’t* kill that girl. It was his knife, after all, in her ribs all those years ago.

“Good. That would be stupid, Autumn, and I’ve accepted this. You understand that, right?”

He leans even farther forward, trying to catch my eyes, but I don’t want to look at him. I don’t want to acknowledge what he’s saying.

It’s so unfair that he’s here.

That someone else is out there, free, a murderer.

“You shouldn’t accept it.” I spit the words out. “You didn’t do this. You shouldn’t be in here —”

“That’s not going to change anything.”

I sit back hard, as if the words physically hurt. Stephen suddenly doesn’t look so good anymore. Dark circles are forming under his eyes, and his breathing is ragged and slow.

“You should go. I’ll call you Saturday.”

I don’t answer, standing instead and gathering my near-empty purse, eyes watering with anger and fear.

I can’t lose him, I tell myself over and over as I check out with the guards. *I can’t, not after everything. He’s all I have left.*

Outside, the cloudy sky has finally turned to rain. I rush across the lot, drizzle flattening my hair, hiding the tears that slip out.

Chris is leaning against the hood of his car. Head ducked.

He glances up and sees me, startling.

When I reach him, he has the door open. I pause.

“How dare you.”

His brows knit. The words are almost lost to the rain, so I say it again.

“How dare you. I told you—I trusted you. You had no right.”

His hand is on the door, body bracketing me in as the rain moves over both of us in little waves.

“How dare *I*? I promised you I wouldn’t ask questions, Autumn. And I didn’t.”

“You breached my privacy by following me in.”

“I wanted to make sure you were safe.”

He frowns, tripping over the lie. We both know it for what it is, and I sneer at him, wiping my hair back from my face.

“You keep saying that. But I think all you’ve proven today is that I can’t trust you.”

I fold myself into the car, pulling the door shut and narrowly avoiding crushing Chris’s hand as I do so.

He stands there for a second longer, hands balled into fists. The rain sheets across the window, obscuring my view. I lean forward in the seat, trying to quell the nervous nausea in my stomach.

I want to go home. I want to be alone.

But there is no home, and there is no being alone.

Even if I leave and go back to the apartment, Orla will be there. Another person mad at me; someone else to see how much of an ass I’ve made of myself.

And if not Orla, then Kieran.

No matter what I do, I can’t stop the past from haunting me.

Chapter 18

Chris

My bare feet don't make any sound as I pace the bedroom, but I still worry that Autumn can hear me. That she's just as awake as I am at 11 p.m., replaying the events of the day.

How we both fucked up.

The mess we're in now.

I can't trust you.

If she meant it, there's no way she's asleep. If she meant it, her door is locked, and she's just as scared of me as she is of her ex.

Why did I follow her?

What drove me to it? Part of me wants to say it was instinct, the lawyer in me sniffing out bullshit, a secret, and needing to know.

She's right. She can't trust me. I can't be this close to her and not cross a line.

I make a hard turn for the nightstand and pick up my phone, thumbing through contacts quickly.

Nate picks up on the second ring.

"Everything okay?" He sounds more awake than I expected for a new father. My brows rise in surprise.

"Not really. Rough day. Any chance I can stop by?"

"Not here," he sighs. "I just put the baby down and Gen is sleeping. She

needs it. How about O'Reilly's?"

Minutes later, I'm out the front door, still barefoot and still in a haze of confusion and pain.



THE DINER DOOR chimes quietly as I walk in, hoping no one notices the lack of shoes. The tile floor is cool on my feet. A shiver runs through me; in my haste to leave the house, I didn't throw on a jacket, either.

Pajama pants and a T-shirt it is.

Nate is sitting in a booth on the other side of the room. His face screws up in judgment as he watches me power walk toward him, hair a mess and wild-eyed.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"I could ask the same."

It's a low blow. Nate looks tired, but not too bad. After all, he went through all this before with Eva when she was a baby—with his first wife. But I doubt he thought he'd be doing it all over again after falling for his private chef.

"Sorry. Like I said, rough day."

Nate sighs as I settle into the booth. Already the familiarity of the place is calming, draining away the adrenaline of the day. Nate and I used to come here to this little hole-in-the-wall before we made it big. Back then, we'd scrounge around in our pockets for loose change to pay the bill. Now, we make a point to tip handsomely, which is why the seasoned waitress gives us a big grin.

"Your usual, Mr. Sharpe?"

"Chris, please, Dottie. And yeah. Can I add on a peanut butter milkshake?"

"Whipped cream?"

"Of course."

Nate's eyes narrow. He knows if I'm getting a milkshake, it must be bad. Dot leaves to put in my order—Nate's is already in, I'm assuming—and I prepare myself to unravel this crazy story all over again. Taking a deep breath, I dive in.

TEN MINUTES LATER, he's letting it all sink in with wide eyes as I decimate the milkshake. There's also a basket of perfectly crisp fries, the smell making my stomach rumble, and a pastrami sandwich. Nate's order mirrors my own, sans milkshake, and with onion rings instead of fries.

"So you definitely recognized the guy. You're sure."

"Mmm. Yeah. I never forget a face, especially when it's someone I had a hand in putting away."

Guilt flashes through me. Back then, I was heavily considering moving from prosecutor to defense attorney, but I needed to seal the deal with my reputation...win a few more cases. What if...

"Okay, so who is he?"

"Stephen Cooper." I squint, looking past Nate as I try to put the pieces together. Some of them have already clicked into place. Others, I'm ignoring. Until I know for sure. "The judge decided on a ten-year sentence for manslaughter. A young woman was killed in an alley, out back after a bar fight. Throat slit and the knife left in her ribs. It was his knife."

I can still remember it like it was yesterday, even though it was twelve years ago. Storming into the courtroom. Stephen Cooper, relatively young back then—he definitely didn't look like a criminal. But they don't always. And the cops were so sure. I was, too.

"What if I was wrong?"

It comes out as a mutter, but Nate catches the question and leans in.

"Are you only asking yourself that because of this girl?"

Woman, I want to correct him. Nate has no idea just what kind of woman Autumn is. An enigma. Not just a capable, hard fighter, but a sultry, soft lover. An image of her curled up on the couch with Frank comes to mind—floral-patterned pajama pants and an oversized T-shirt. Her face pink from a shower, painted toes peeking out.

I shake my head, both to rid myself of the memory and in answer to his question.

"I just can't figure out why she was visiting him."

Nathan shrugs and picks at the onion rings. "Who knows, maybe he's an old flame."

"No. That's not it."

My older brother laughs in that frustrating, *I know better than you* way

that's always driven me crazy.

"Maybe that's what you want to think, Chris. If you ask me, you're wrapped up too tightly in this. You need some help. And I don't just mean venting to me over a pastrami sandwich."

He pulls out his cell and I frown, not sure what he's getting at. A few seconds later, my own phone vibrates. A group message.

He's looped Jenson into this—just one sentence.

Hey, can you do some digging around on someone for us?

"Nate, this isn't —"

He holds up a hand. "You're the one who wanted to create some trinity of brothers, remember?" I shut my mouth tightly, recalling just how opposed Nate was to meeting our younger half brother. "You want us to get along? If anyone can find out more about this Autumn..."

"Cavendish."

"Right. If anyone can, it's Jenson."

Nate quickly types out her name and hits send. Despite it being close to midnight, Jenson answers fairly quickly.

Isn't this something Chris can handle with his own resources? Happy to help, just asking.

I start to type out a response, but Nate beats me to it.

Chris is in too deep on this one. Also, it's a coworker. Need to be discreet.

I'll see what I can do, Jenson answers. Have to ask though—is this the kind of "coworker" that got me into trouble?

He's referring to Melanie, his wife, who was also his employee. The similarity of our situations hits me right then—how did I not notice it before?

But no, this is different; Jenson and Mel had a history. They were made for each other, fated to end up together.

Autumn and me...we're a mess. A constant push and pull, like waves on the sand. She draws me in like the tide.

"Let him do his work." Nate sighs. "We'll reconvene in the morning. Think you can get home and try to get some sleep?"

"I'll give it a shot. Thanks. And sorry for dragging you out."

We stand, clasp each other's forearms in a tight grip. Still brothers, still on each other's side, no matter how crazy our lives get or how much money is in our bank accounts.

HOURS LATER, I wake up to a string of texts. And then a phone call as I squint at the screen.

“Wake up,” Jenson bites out.

“You there, Chris?”

Nate is on the call, too. I sit up, frowning.

“Yeah. Morning. What’s up?”

“Nate filled me in on the rest of this situation, and you need to stay away from this woman,” Jenson warns. I bury my face in my hand, wishing Nate had given me the chance to explain.

“Jenson, it’s not —”

“It *is* serious, if that’s where you were going with this. ‘Cavendish’ is not her real name. It’s Cooper.”

A bottomless pit opens up in my stomach.

I stare at the bedroom door, as if I can see through it. She’s right down the hallway. Two doors away.

She’s been under me, on her knees in front of me, in my car, laughing, arguing, parsing cases with me at the firm.

Autumn Cavendish.

Autumn Cooper.

“She’s Stephen Cooper’s sister.” Nate sighs. “And I’m guessing she didn’t tell you that.”

“No.” My head drops back against the headboard. “But if I’m being honest...I think I was already putting that together. Seeing them together. They definitely share some similar features.”

That solemn expression, the bow of their upper lips, the way they both held themselves. Hard to miss unless you’re trying to, which I think I was.

What do I do now?

“Well, whether you guessed it or not, you obviously need to end whatever you have going on. Cut her out of everything. The firm, too, if you can.”

“What? Jenson, I can’t just —”

“I’m with Jenson on this one, Chris. Sorry. I know you’ve been... growing attached to her, but this is a different level of betrayal. And there’s something screwy going on.”

“Why would she join *your* firm?” Jenson persists. “You put her brother in prison. You don’t think that’s strange, Chris?”

I do, I want to plead. But I don't know if I can stand to lose her. I don't know if I can let her go like this.

Cold turkey.

What would that look like? Walking into the office tomorrow morning and going straight to HR. Having security remove her from the building.

Blacklisting her from other firms.

Never speaking to her again.

Leaving her vulnerable to whatever her ex has in mind for her.

No, I can't do it. But Jenson and Nathan will never accept that answer.

"You're right," I say stiffly. "She should've told me the truth from the start."

I leave it vague enough that they hopefully interpret it as acquiescence. A large part of me does feel disappointed, betrayed, confused—but I just can't leave things like this.

It took years for me to hone my instincts as a lawyer, and right now they're all shouting at me that something more is going on.

I need to wait and see.

"Thank you both. Really. It's good to know I have people who have my back."

As the words come out, I can't help wondering—does Autumn have anyone on *her* side? Or has she been completely alone all this time?

Chapter 19

Autumn

Everything is off kilter. It's like having vertigo.

Even snuggled under the comforter at Chris's, I just can't get comfortable. Two days of feeling betrayed—two days of near silence between him and me.

It's harder than I thought it would be. Crazy, because if you'd told me a year ago that I'd be living in Chris Sharpe's house, longing for his companionship, I would've thrown myself off a cliff.

But here we are.

Frank whines at the end of the bed, putting his big head on my leg and staring up at me with those soulful eyes.

I don't know what to tell you, I think desperately. I don't know where we go from here.

For the past two days, my options have been ricocheting around in my brain. Nothing feels quite right—do I leave Chris's house? Do I leave my job? Do I go back to the apartment and put Orla in danger if Kieran is still looking for me?

I think of all the cases I'd leave unfinished. All the questions my coworkers would have. And I think of Chris, alone again in this house, in the unsettling quiet.

There's a knock on the door and I jump, yanking the covers up higher.

“Yeah?”

Chris pushes the door open gently.

“Hey. Are you busy?”

It’s still stiff and awkward between us. Everything feels unfinished, but I can’t just walk away. It’s like I’m tied to him somehow.

“No.” *Please, please don’t ask to talk about this more—please don’t question me.* “I’m just...relaxing.”

Funny. I’m definitely doing the exact opposite.

As if he can read my mind, he raises a brow.

“I want to take you out to dinner.”

Frank raises his head at the same time I sit up. “What?”

Chris moves farther into the doorway, leaning on it with that slightly cocky smile. Just a hint of it, but it makes my heart flutter.

Maybe this can be salvaged.

Should it be salvaged?

I push the thought away, clutching the comforter.

“I’m really fine with takeout, Chris, or whatever’s in the fridge. I’ll find something —”

“No. I want to take you out as an apology. Please.” His eyes shift from me to the closet, where most of my things are unpacked. “Don’t forget, I’ve seen your wardrobe. I know you have at least one or two things you could wear out to a fancy restaurant.”

I duck my chin to hide a smile. When was the last time I went out on the town? Maybe a month or two ago when Orla and I dipped into a dive bar to play a game of pool.

He’s right. I have one or two dresses I’ve been dying to wear, and with my work life, and lack of a love life, I haven’t had the chance.

Might not have the opportunity again anytime soon.

“Alright,” I relent, pulling my legs up and biting my lip. Frank thumps his tail. “Yeah. Give me half an hour to get ready?”

Chris whistles low in amusement. “Wow, that’s it? Works for me. I’ll take Frank out.”

My pup jumps from the bed at the sound of his name, and Chris and I share shy smiles.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, on the dot—I hate to be late—I meet Chris at the front door.

He’s all decked out in a perfectly tailored suit, hair slicked back, looking every inch the billionaire lawyer. My belly stirs with desire as I take him in, a blush warming my cheeks.

“You look amazing,” he murmurs, holding out a hand.

I take it, confused, and he turns me into a little twirl, earning a laugh.

“Oh, please. After a Friday at the office, I’m sure I look a mess.”

Chris shakes his head, his eyes sliding down my body. “Really, Autumn. You look great. I’m going to be the envy of every guy out there.”

He pulls open the door and that flutter is back. *Oh, no. I’m in deep—deeper than I thought.*

“Come on. I want to give you the kind of night out you deserve.”



THE RESTAURANT IS BEAUTIFUL, simple, and small, with ornate carvings in the wood and dim lighting. Deep forest greens are matched with pinks, a color palette that works surprisingly well.

Bittersweet Roux.

“Wait, isn’t this place relatively hard to get into?”

Chris looks over his shoulder at me, a sparkle in his dark eyes. “It is. But I know a guy.”

“A guy, hmm?”

The velvety voice makes him startle as a woman leans around him. She’s beautiful—tall and glowing, as if she’s drawing all the light in the room to herself. She smiles widely and holds out a hand.

“Hi, I’m Gen. Are you Chris’s...date?” The wicked grin she gives him actually brings a blush to his cheeks and I chuckle.

“Gen, reel it in. I don’t want to scare her off already.”

“Mmm, I can see why. How did *you* get a woman like *this* to come out with you?”

They’re teasing each other, but for a moment it’s like I don’t exist as she leans in and gives him an enthusiastic kiss on the cheek, arms wrapped around his waist.

A twist of jealousy shudders up my body, causing a blush to bloom on my

chest. Is she one of those women he took out, was on the cover of a magazine, spent a night with? She certainly seems happy enough to see him.

“Your table is in the back corner. Figured you’d want a little privacy, even though you wouldn’t tell any of us who you were bringing for dinner.” She gives him another saucy look, a nudge of her hip, and sways her way back toward the kitchen. The white coat she’s wearing clicks understanding into place.

“Is she the chef?”

“And owner.” Chris looks annoyed, amused, and a little worried. He turns me deftly, lifting my coat off and handing it to the hostess. “Ready?”

His hand is warm, fingertips caressing as they ghost over my palm. He leads me to the back of the restaurant, where it’s quieter and more fragrant with spices. A few curious eyes are on us. *Anyone he knows?*

What did she mean, he wouldn’t tell them who he was bringing?

“So...how well do you know her?”

There’s ice to the words that I didn’t intend. Chris catches it, too, and hesitates, his eyes meeting mine over the table.

“Gen is my brother’s wife. They’re the ones with the two daughters. Eva and Roux.”

Oh, God. It’s like a slap in the face—Roux. *Bittersweet Roux*, like the restaurant.

Before I can apologize or make any more of an ass out of myself, a waitress shows up and offers us menus. She lists off the specials and takes our drink orders. I stick with prosecco, my first and last of the evening. The last thing I need is to make more of an idiot of myself with the help of a good buzz.

As we wait, Chris slowly spins his glass of whiskey, peering at me with those dark eyes.

“Autumn, I want to apologize. I was out of line at Fishkill.”

It’s direct, sincere, and I can’t look away from him. It’s like I’m pinned in place, breath caught.

I believe him.

“I...I appreciate that, Chris, but to be honest, I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Everything in me is shying away from this topic. From having to explain Stephen. From getting too close to telling Chris why I’m at his firm, in his home, *here* with him. But I can’t keep lying to him.

My heart sinks with the realization.

It's not new, that I don't want to lie. It's been a problem my whole life. I like to think it makes me a good lawyer, but right now the ball is definitely not in my court.

Right on time, the waitress returns. Chris lightens up briefly enough to play his charming self, and she laughs and flushes, touching her hair self-consciously.

"Ladies first."

The way he says it sends a shiver down my spine, and inexplicably, I think of other times and places I want to hear him say it—like in bed.

With eyes glazed over, I order a seasonal risotto and salad. I'm not usually a salad girl, but the promise of burrata sucks me in. Chris goes with a classic pork chop and apple entrée and politely turns his attention away from the waitress, who looks a little disappointed.

He looks down, breathes out through his nose, and I brace myself.

Is this dinner actually an interrogation? A last-ditch effort to get the truth out of me?

What man in his right mind would persist at this point?

"I'm not going to ask you about that tonight, Autumn. I told you—I just want to show you what you deserve."

My heart is pounding in my chest. What does he mean, show me what I deserve?

I don't deserve any of *this*, a quiet but opulent restaurant, a man's full attention. The woman I was a decade ago shivers inside. I raise a hand to my throat, warding off the ghost of the past.

Interrupting the rush of memories, a different hand wraps around my leg. Chris locks his eyes on mine and gives a slight tug, making me gasp.

"Did you hear me?" he murmurs in that velvet voice that makes my blood run hot.

I nod, unable to look away as his fingers stroke the underside of my knee. Thank God his sister-in-law put us far in the back, out of the lights and away from prying eyes.

The food comes and Chris pulls back.

"Thank you." He says the words to our server but doesn't break eye contact with me. The waitress flushes again, inevitably sensing the heat between us. When we're alone again, I drop my gaze to the salad and pick at the leaves with a fork.

“Tell me what you want, Autumn.”

He says it like a demand. I look up through my lashes, part of me longing to tell him, *I want you to take me home. I want you to put me on my knees again, tell me I’m a good girl, and make me come. I want to spend the entire weekend under you, on top of you, forgetting that the rest of the world exists.*

But that’s impossible.

“What do you mean?” I breathe.

“*What do you want?* It’s a simple question.” His brows furrow, food untouched. “But maybe you’ve never been asked that before.”

I wait, but he doesn’t question me further—not about my past, not about the things that make me feel inferior.

That’s all going through my mind right now, and to quench it, I blurt out an answer to his inquiry.

“A family.”

“A family? You mean —”

I feel the heat in my cheeks and am thankful for the dim lights.

“A family like what your brothers have. Kids and a spouse or partner. Someone to share a life with.”

I’ve never admitted that out loud and it sounds ridiculous. Clearing my throat to hide anxiety and shame, I try and turn my attention back to the plates in front of me.

Chris reaches out and takes my hand, stilling the other.

“How many?” There’s something unreadable in his eyes as he asks. My chest swells with a sensation of overwhelm, a dizzy headiness. “Kids,” he clarifies, sitting back with his own look of embarrassment.

He’s *eager*. The realization makes my lips part and I bite back a smile.

Does Chris Sharpe, ruthless lawyer and billionaire, want kids?

“I’m not sure. More than one, for sure; I liked having—” I break off, Stephen’s face immediately coming to mind. First as a kid, his laughter as we played together, and then just a few days ago. The look on his face when he registered Chris over my shoulder.

Chris waves away the awkward break in conversation and picks up as if nothing happened.

“I feel the same way. I can’t imagine not having had a brother. And between you and me—” he leans in close, a mischievous glint to his eyes “—*only* children are always brats, I think. Marty’s a perfect example.”

I can’t help the laugh that bursts out, covering my mouth immediately as

other diners glance our way. Chris is grinning as he sits back. He finally starts in on his dinner, a satisfied look on his face.

It's not like he doesn't know, a little voice whispers in my mind. *You've already told him about losing your parents. What's the worst that happens if—*

The worst that happens is I give in to whatever is happening between us, whatever force is cementing us together. Stephen spends another two years in prison. That's two more years he'll never get back. His name is never cleared. He gets out and can't find a job, can't find a place to live. Meanwhile I'm—what?—with Chris, who is a self-confessed workaholic. Still at Sharpe Law? If we were to pursue anything, I'd never make partner. If we were to keep it under wraps, I'd be a secret, I'd live half a life.

“More than that.” Chris looks up, caught off guard by my statement. “I'd want more than that. I'd want...a partner. Someone who holds up their half. Someone I can rely on.”

His eyes burn into me from where he's sitting.

“That's the least you deserve,” he says quietly. “And I'd expect no less from any man you choose to love.”

Love.

The word makes me go cold, then hot. A buzzing sensation courses through my body and something *like* desire, but so much different, overwhelms my senses.

“If I was yours,” he continues in a low voice, so quietly that only I can hear him, “I'd do one better and take care of you. I'd keep you safe, cherish you.”

The flush that takes over my body is total—from head to toe. My pulse pounds in my ears and I grip the edge of the table, ready to stand, lean in, capture the promise on his lips.

Instead, the clash of glass on tile pulls my attention away.

In the entrance of the restaurant, staring at only *me*, is the man I escaped a decade ago.

Kieran.

Chapter 20

Chris

Running on some primal instinct, I stand, both hands braced on the table, and stare down Autumn's ex. If I were anything other than a well-dressed man in a high-end restaurant, I'd growl, but somehow, I'm still holding on to an ounce of decorum.

Kieran sees the sneer on my face and grins, taking one step toward us.

Only his eyes aren't on me.

They're locked on Autumn.

She's frozen, a look of horror on her face. One hand clutches a knife. Good. Even scared, she's ready to fight if she has to.

But I won't let that happen.

I round the table easily and stand in front of her, breaking Kieran's line of sight. The anger that rolls over his face like a thundercloud is mindless. I've seen it before on criminals, real criminals, and a shock of adrenaline goes through me at the realization.

Kieran might be more of a threat than I realized.

He slinks to the side, eyes still seeking Autumn. Other patrons are watching; how could they not? The man in front of me is obviously not Bittersweet Roux's normal clientele. He wears faded jeans, a cheap T-shirt, sneakers that are so dirty, it's impossible to tell the color. A silver chain glints at his throat as he moves in like a predator.

“Excuse me,” the hostess tries.

Kieran reaches out and shoves her away with no effort. The young woman lets out a strangled yelp and falls back into an older man’s lap. People start talking, the atmosphere picking up with wariness and alarm.

“Autumn.”

Her body goes rigid. I want badly to wrap her in my arms, but something won’t let me take my eyes off this man.

“Autumn. Come here. We need to talk.” He practically growls the last words, his chin dropping to shadow his gaze.

Autumn’s lips are parted. It’s like some kind of internal struggle is happening. Her grip tightens on the knife, and in that instant, I can’t let this go any further. I can’t watch this fear twist her, and I can’t deal with the minuscule thought that she might actually get up and go with him.

“I know who you are.” The words are low, deep, and full of unspoken warning.

Kieran’s eyes flash toward me, reevaluating. That twisted grin is back, pulling weirdly at his cheekbones.

“Mmm, do you, old man?” He takes a step closer. “Then you know just how much Autumn means to me. You know that she’s mine. Aren’t you, baby?”

A shiver goes through her at the words. I see it rack her body from head to toe, and she pulls back, shoulders rounding, a look of panic in her eyes.

“Don’t take another step toward her.”

He barks out a laugh. “Oh, yeah? And what are you going to do about it? You suit wearing crooks, I’ve seen what you’re made of—cowardice.”

That’s oddly pointed, and I tuck it away to consider later. Kieran takes another step closer and I mirror it, flexing my shoulders. We’d be evenly matched if it weren’t for his lean, almost coyote-like build. Rangy, like a fox trying to steal dinner. His eyes glint and so does that chain again.

His gaze snaps to Autumn again and that’s it.

I surge forward, fisting his T-shirt in both hands and walking him back, *dragging* him toward the entrance. The hostess is huddled against the wall, watching with wide, scared eyes—as are most of the customers. Someone in the kitchen shouts. Blind with anger, I barely notice Gen come out into the dining area, carrying an old-school knife sharpener like a weapon.

“Christopher Sharpe, don’t you *dare* shove him through my windows.”

Blinking, I realize I was closer to doing so than I thought. Kieran has a

surprised look on his face, his own hands gripping my wrists. He's seconds away from going through the pretty glass plating embossed with *Bittersweet Roux*.

"Do I need to call the cops?"

Kieran looks startled and tries to jerk away at Gen's suggestion.

"I just wanted to see her," he snarls, spit flying from his clenched teeth. "I just wanted to fucking see her. We have unfinished business, you and I!"

His voice is raised, the last remark clearly aimed at Autumn. I let him go with a shove toward the door and he stumbles but still pushes outside.

For a moment he lingers there—a dark shadow out on the sidewalk, looking in. A sense of foreboding drops over me like a curtain. From the silence of the patrons in the restaurant, I can't help wondering if they feel the same.

"You better go," Gen murmurs, tipping her head in Autumn's direction.

She's still tucked into the chair, leaning back and away from the front of the restaurant, her eyes dull and staring.

"Hey."

I get down on one knee in front of her. Take her hands, clammy and shaking.

"Hey. Autumn."

Her eyes meet mine, but they're not focused, not quite. She's still scared.

"I told you. I'll keep you safe. He's gone. We'll wait, and when you're settled, we'll go home."

She nods, hair brushing her chin and catching on her bitten bottom lip. I stay there in front of her, not caring how crazy it looks or what kind of talk there'll be about Gen's place tomorrow.

Right now, all that matters is getting rid of that look on her face—like a scared little girl.

Like a ghost just showed up.



THURSDAY IS hell in the office.

I want to focus, but all day, all I can think about is Autumn.

Not just what she suffered the night I took her out, but how ill she's been since.

“Maybe it’s something psychological?” I mumble to Gen on a private call, my office door shut mid-day. “She threw up right before we got to the car, and a few more times once we got home.”

Gen snorts. “Good to know how my food affects her.”

I roll my eyes but give her a pass on making light of the situation. We’re all a little stressed out by what happened. I’m not quite convinced that Kieran took my threat seriously.

I might have to actually throw him through a window.

“I don’t know, Chris. You say you don’t have the full story on her and her ex. But you’ve seen what goes on in court—you’ve seen how people react to certain criminals. What’s the lawyer in you saying?”

“I’ve been trying not to think about that.”

“Well, too bad. If you really want to help her, and she won’t talk about it, then you’re going to have to cut some corners.”

With a sigh, I admit, “You’re right. Everything about the way she acts points to an abusive ex. It’s just so hard to see her like this. She’s a strong, competent woman, Gen, an excellent lawyer from what I’ve seen so far. But he has her so scared.”

“It makes sense. Not everyone gets it, but situations like that—you almost get PTSD. As much as you don’t want to regress, you become the person you were when all that bullshit was going on. It doesn’t mean she’s not strong, Chris, it just means she needs help remembering she still is.”

The tendon in my jaw twitches. At this rate, I’m going to grind my teeth down to nothing.

“I know. I’m trying.”

Gen’s voice is tender. “I can tell. So...is this someone you’ll be bringing over for dinner anytime soon? At home, not the restaurant.”

A light flush travels up my neck, but before I have to answer, someone knocks at the door. I look up to find Grant standing there and relief washes through me.

“Sorry, Gen, I’ve got to go—an important client just walked in.”

“Oh, of course, the second I mention you might be genuinely *interested* in someone —”

“Love you, kiss the kids for me. Talk later.”

I hang up.

Out of the frying pan...

Grant is looking at me suspiciously as he closes the door.

“Sounds like my arrival just got you out from between a rock and a hard place.”

“Maybe,” I concede. “What brings you here? Finally giving up on retirement?”

It’s a joke...mostly. What I wouldn’t give to have Grant back. I wonder if he’d be interested in consulting. Which would mostly just be me asking for his sage wisdom.

Grant smiles. “Definitely not. Actually, I have a pottery class in an hour and decided to stop by on my way in.”

“Pottery?” I raise my brows.

“Don’t knock it till you try it, alright? Besides, a lot of single women take up pottery.”

“Ah, there it is. You finally took my advice and got into the dating world!”

“Er, not exactly. But I’m being open-minded. Actually, I wanted to talk to you about a related subject.”

“Related to pottery?”

“No, to women.”

I wince and Grant sighs, both of us ready to act out an age-old conversation. Grant tries to convince me that settling down is worth it; I insist it’s the last thing I need.

But these days...

“I noticed you haven’t been in the papers much over the last month or two. Have you given up on dating? I thought it was your favorite hobby.”

“Ha, ha. No, I’m just...focusing more on work.”

And a particular woman at work. But he doesn’t need to know that.

“Well, I just spoke to Nate, who asked if I was bringing a guest to the wedding, and it made me curious as to what your plan is. Do you have a lucky lady picked out already, or are you going to spontaneously ask the first beautiful woman you see step out of a cab?”

I can’t help grinning, because that’s actually something I’ve done before. For a second, I think about admitting that, yes, my plus-one is going to be completely on the fly. Some woman I can have a nice, superficial evening with, someone fun and easy on the eyes.

Then Autumn’s face flashes through my mind.

Her serious eyes.

I realize that all I really want is *her*. If I have to spend the night with

anyone, I want it to be her.

“I don’t know.”

Grant stares at me, the humor gone from his eyes. He squints.

“Alright, son. I think it’s time to come clean. You’ve been hiding something for a few weeks now.”

Not something—*someone*.

The exhaustion of the last few days sets in and my shoulders slump. I’ve barely been keeping it together. Autumn is distant, I’m trying to reconcile the waves of violence and protectiveness I keep feeling, and there’s no point in denying anymore that I’m head over heels for her.

So I tell the truth.

“I met someone.”

Grant nods slowly. Out on the floor, there’s a flurry of movement. Autumn is leading her client and a few members of her team toward one of our conference rooms. My eyes are glued to her—her curves, the swing of her hair as she looks over her shoulder to speak to them, the serious expression on her face.

Guiltily, I glance back at Grant.

Realization spreads across his face.

“Oh, Chris.”

“It’s bad,” I groan, sitting back heavily. “I didn’t mean for it to turn into anything serious...”

“It shouldn’t have turned into anything *at all*. You know my feelings on workplace relationships.”

His voice is chilled, cold, his eyes flat. Is he thinking of Lenore? Of falling in love with and losing her?

“They’re the same as mine, Grant, but this was...”

How do I explain it?

Unexpected.

Inevitable.

“It’s...it’s...complicated.”

With a sigh, Grant leans against a chair. He mulls the situation over, brows furrowed.

“You trust her? This isn’t one of those situations where she’s only after you for money or advancement in her career?”

I shake my head. “No. She’s going after partner, but she’s actually the one who wanted to keep this quiet. Actually—” I glance out into the office

again, but Autumn is long gone “—I think things are a little more one-sided than I’d like to admit.”

Grant’s mouth quirks into an amused smile.

“So she’s smart.”

I laugh. “Yes, very smart. And a good lawyer. If things were different...” Waving a hand, I do what I’ve been doing this whole time and don’t let the thought take root. But it catches Grant’s attention.

“No, don’t do that. If things were different—what? What would you do?”

There’s only a moment of hesitation before I answer.

Because I know exactly what I want.

“If things were different, I’d let her consume me. I’d give her anything she wanted. I’d take her to Nate and Gen’s wedding, show her off, make everyone jealous, go home and treat her like a queen, and never let her leave.”

I’d beg her to marry me.

That thought takes me by surprise. But in this moment, I know it’s true.

Autumn is the only woman I want. The only one I need, and I’d give up anything for her.

Pressing my lips together, I look at Grant, worried. He must see it in my eyes, because he sighs again.

“Well, there’s only one thing to do, then. You’ve got to tell her.”

Chapter 21

Autumn

“You’ll be fine, boy, go back to sleep.”

Frank whines nervously and I glance up, worried that Chris will hear and come out to see what’s going on. But I can still hear the shower running.

It’s Saturday morning; if I catch the train now, I can be at Fishkill in two hours.

But Frank knows something is off and wags his tail low and wide, big brown eyes staring up at me.

“It’ll be fine,” I whisper, in part to reassure myself just as much as him. “I won’t be gone long. Just stay here. Distract him if you can.”

Kissing my big mutt on the head, I sling my purse over my shoulder, stand, and open the front door quietly.

There’s already an Uber waiting out front to take me to the station. My stomach twists into a knot; this feels *wrong*.

It’s not too late for me to go back inside and ask Chris to drive me.

I can’t do it, though. Things have felt too...close. Too vulnerable. It’s like there’s no longer a wall between us.

Hurrying to the car, I slide inside and shut the door. “Hi, thank you for waiting.”

The drive to the station isn’t long, but it’s long enough for me to worry about this new development. Not Kieran showing up and confronting me so

openly—somehow, that bothers me less than the fact that Chris was so willing to step in front of me.

To risk his own safety for mine.

He's not the man you thought he was, the voice in my head whispers.

I press my eyes closed, hearing Chris's voice, now, instead. *If I was yours...*

My heart thunders in my chest.

If he was *mine*.

Old feelings shatter through me, of inadequacy, fear, and trepidation.

I don't deserve someone like Chris. I don't deserve all that attention, the luxury, the safety net of someone else caring for me so deeply.

And the look in his eyes that night...

It made me realize just how much I want him to be mine.



“ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE OKAY?”

Stephen's gaze is worried as I pop another ginger candy between my lips and suck on it to try and get rid of the nausea.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Just ate something bad.”

Actually, I've barely been eating at all because of this upset stomach. But I don't want to tell him that and worry him, especially because the only thing I can think of that would cause this is Kieran showing back up.

I don't need Stephen to know about that.

“How's the lawyer treating you?” Stephen asks casually, toying with a piece of paper he's folded into a flower on the tabletop.

Despite his nonchalant demeanor, I can see the hard edge to his curious eyes.

“Fine.” Rolling my stiff shoulders, I try to match his ease. “Six more months to prove that I deserve partner at the firm, and I think I've got a pretty good shot at it.” In a fit of brilliance, I start telling him about Marty—how she's my competition, treats the interns like shit, and is practically climbing Chris Sharpe like a tree.

As my rant goes on, a slow smile stretches across Stephen's face. It's been so long since I've seen such a carefree smile that I falter.

“What?”

“You just seem happy. And maybe a little jealous.”

My cheeks go pink. He’s right, but I’m not going to admit it, so I scoff instead. “Jealous? Never. I would never—the man put you in prison, Stephen, I couldn’t —”

The rambling explanation is more for myself than my brother, and of course, Stephen sees right through it. His smile melts into something sad.

“Autumn, you know I want you to be happy, right? And Sharpe doesn’t seem like a bad guy.”

I sit back, stunned.

“How can you say that?”

He shrugs. “He doesn’t. I was angry the first few years, you know, and I kept up with him. With what his firm was doing. It seems like he’s turned things around. Defense and all, right? And I trust you. You wouldn’t work there unless he was a good person.”

I don’t know what to say.

My heart is breaking, because Stephen is right. Over the past few weeks, I’ve started to believe that Chris isn’t the coldhearted man I thought he was.

He’s trying to change things. For the better.

But if that’s true, what does it say about Stephen being here? I reach across the table, gripping his hand so tight he looks up in surprise.

“Stephen. *You didn’t do this.* Don’t forget that; you shouldn’t be here.” After twelve years, I finally say out loud the promise I made the day he got convicted of a crime he didn’t commit. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

I just have no idea how.



BY THE TIME I get back to the house, I’m so exhausted from traveling—and lying to myself and Stephen—that seeing Chris in the foyer startles a gasp from me.

“Where have you been?”

He doesn’t look at the hand pressed to my chest or the purse gripped tightly. His dark eyes bore into mine, but now they don’t stir desire, just anxiety.

“I went to Fishkill.”

I try to make it sound casual, but Chris’s face reddens and Frank slinks

nervously into the living room.

He steps forward and takes hold of my forearms. My purse drops to the ground. His grip is gentle but insistent, his gaze imploring.

“Why would you do that? Why didn’t you just ask me to drive you? I’ve been worried —”

Chris catches on the last word. Embarrassment flashes across his face.

Of course he was worried about me. Dropping my eyes and biting my lip, I explain, “I just had to see Stephen.”

With an exasperated sigh, Chris lets go and steps back, running a hand through his hair. It’s a nervous habit, one that I find frustratingly attractive.

“You drive me crazy. And Frank, he was acting like something was wrong. You didn’t answer my calls.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.” Digging through my purse pockets, I pull out my cell and see two missed calls and texts. “It was on silent.”

Chris turns and paces away into the house, hands on his hips. He looks angry, worried, confused. I follow, too tired to care that I probably look less than impressive in my jeans and white T-shirt. As he takes me in, Chris tousles his hair again, eyes going to the ceiling.

“Autumn, I know he’s your brother. I know who he is. But I need you to tell me; I need it to come from *you*.”

Surprised, I drop the purse into an armchair in the living room.

“You know...”

Chris waits, but when I don’t finish, he nods wearily. “Yes. I know who Stephen Cooper is.” His face is serious, eyes pinning me in place, expectant but not forceful. “I know Cavendish isn’t your last name.”

My body goes cold, then flushes with heat.

The last decade of hard work, of building a new name for myself, literally, might be ruined this very moment.

“I need you to tell me,” he repeats quietly.

I drop into the armchair, completely oblivious to the purse digging into my back. With a low whine, Frank is at my side, his big head in my lap. I stroke his ears blindly, trying to find comfort in this sudden wash of anxiety and adrenaline.

Chris sits across from me on the stylish and totally impractical leather sofa. He leans forward, elbows on his knees, eyes intense.

With a deep breath, it all comes spilling out.

“Stephen is my brother. My older brother. He’s been in prison for twelve

years.”

Chris barely nods at this part, and I wonder just how much he remembers about Stephen’s trial—about being the prosecutor.

“You were the one who opposed him in court. You were the one who got him sentenced.”

Chris’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t say anything. The words came out with an edge of bitterness; I’m still mad. I should be more upset, but the last few weeks have been so confusing, learning more and more about him, working beside him.

“Stephen was charged with manslaughter. He was at a bar where a woman died. Her throat was slit and she was stabbed; they found her out behind the building with a knife in her ribs. Stephen was there that night with friends.”

My gaze swings away, fingers tightening in Frank’s ruff. The big mutt tries to move in closer, sensing my dread and sorrow.

“The knife was his,” I whisper, hating to admit it.

What I tell Chris, and what he might already remember, is that the knife had Stephen’s name on it—*S. Cooper*. A graduation present from our dad, and a murder weapon. It was what got Stephen arrested. Along with the fact that —

“He was involved in a brawl that night, wasn’t he?”

Chris’s question is hesitant. He *does* remember. But he doesn’t want to upset me. Something in me softens at the realization and I feel my throat start to close, eyes stinging. I nod.

“There was a fight. Stephen didn’t start it, but he participated in it. He’s not a fighter,” I explain, defending him like I did all those years ago to our dad, to people we knew. “He never has been. He was more beat up than most of the other people in the fight. His nose was broken.”

When they came to arrest him, he was still bruised, the bridge of his nose swollen and crooked.

“And he knew the girl.”

Chris says it quietly. No matter how quiet, though, it sounds like a nail in the coffin.

“Yes. She was from our neighborhood.”

It sounded bad. It looked bad. Even all these years later.

I don’t bother filling in the rest of the details, because it’s obvious from the look on his face that Chris is reliving it in his head.

Stephen knew the girl; Stephen had actually argued with the girl's boyfriend a week before. He and the girl had been chatting and laughing out on the street. The boyfriend saw and was angry, jealous, and went after Stephen, who deescalated the situation.

But other people noticed the exchange. There were witnesses who said Stephen shared one last long look with the girl. I remember being confused—were Stephen and the girl messing around? Had the boyfriend found out?

But why would Stephen kill her?

He wouldn't.

A mantra I'd been carrying for years; a truth I knew deep in my heart.

He would never hurt anyone, would never have done that.

"It looked bad," I say before Chris can get the words out. He snaps his mouth shut, intense eyes locked on mine. "But he didn't do it. He went to Fishkill anyway."

"And you became a lawyer."

Only a second of hesitation before I nod. "I became a lawyer."

"To get him out?"

My throat closes again, not out of grief this time, but self-preservation. I almost say, *to take you down.*

I almost tell the truth.

It's hard not to, sitting in front of Chris Sharpe. I can imagine how witnesses in court feel, their bellies in knots, compelled to start admitting things they promised to keep secret.

I swallow my own secret down, and instead let him have a half-truth.

"Yes. But I haven't found a way to do that yet."

Chapter 22

Chris

Everything in me screams that I shouldn't trust Autumn, but I feel frozen in time as she sits across from me.

Frank's tail is wagging slowly. He can sense the tension in the room, the heady mix of emotions that confuses me. I just can't figure her out. Haven't been able to since day one.

Is that why I'm so drawn to her?

I want to interrogate her, treat her like a witness in a trial, force her to tell the truth. Something tells me she hasn't been completely honest yet, although my instincts aren't insisting she's lying, either...

Autumn Cavendish. Autumn Cooper.

Her older brother is a killer.

At least, that's what he was convicted of—manslaughter in the first degree.

While I don't remember every second of the trial, I remember the certainty of knowing that Stephen Cooper wouldn't be acquitted. That it all looked bad for him.

What I *definitely* don't remember is Autumn being there. She would've been, what, in her early twenties? Maybe a little younger?

Even now, she looks heartbroken. Her eyes flash with tears, but she doesn't cry while curled and tucked into the armchair.

She's so sure. And back then...I was only certain that the court would convict him based on the evidence.

Based on the lack of another person of interest.

Based on the fact that he was a street kid, half orphan, showing up to the courtroom in a secondhand suit that was too short and sporting a bad haircut.

My stomach curdles in shame.

"I can help."

The statement surprises me just as much as it seems to startle Autumn. She looks up suddenly, one tear spilling down her cheek, eyes wide.

"What?"

"I can help you clear his name. Or try to. I keep all my records, so I'll ask my assistant to go back and find them —"

"I already went through everything," Autumn insists, readjusting in the chair. "I poured over all of it. There was nothing to rule him out —"

"But if you're sure he didn't do it, then someone else did; there might be some evidence to prove another person was involved. Something the cops overlooked."

Autumn purses her lips. In this moment, I want so badly to get up, walk over, and kiss her. Reassure her. Pull her into my lap and whisper against her ear that it's going to be okay.

This is crazy, the cool, emotionless voice in my head tells me. *This is impossible*.

I'd do anything for her, I answer in reply. *Anything. Even this*.

Even professional suicide.

That's what it'll be, re-exploring my own case, looking for something to prove myself wrong.

It's career suicide.

Autumn is looking at me through wet lashes, that distrust on her face again. "What?" I ask, giving her an encouraging, half-hearted smile.

"You're a lawyer," she explains, that tone of control back in her voice now. "Lawyers don't believe in true innocence. Everyone is guilty of something."

I shrug. "That's right, everyone is guilty of something. But that 'something' isn't necessarily murder. I'm not saying your brother is a saint, Autumn. I'm just saying...if you're sure he didn't do this, then he shouldn't be serving time for a crime he didn't commit. And we should do what we can to get him out of there."

Pushing myself up off the sofa, I stride into the kitchen and grab my cell.

“What are you doing?”

Autumn follows, arms wrapped around her curvy waist, head tilted curiously. I can't get over how much I love the juxtaposition of her as a lawyer and her at home.

I'd love to be the one she comes home to. To be the one who peels her out of those office clothes, down to her sexy lingerie, get her in a hot bubble bath at the end of the night.

Then naked, preferably in my bed.

“I'm texting Rupert. He has access at home and can send the files over tonight.”

“What? No, Chris, it's Saturday —”

“And a good time to start. Monday I'll have to focus on my other cases for most of the day. Why not start digging in now?”

She looks at me, biting her lip in a way that makes my heart ache.

“Why are you doing this?”

The answer comes easily.

“Because I'd do anything for you, Autumn Cooper.”

Her eyes widen just enough that I can tell it hit home.

This time, she believes me.

But will she let me get closer?

Will she let me love her?

Chapter 23

Autumn

Rebecca, a junior associate, is going over her research Wednesday afternoon when my stomach starts to roil.

Not again. Please, not right now.

My body clenches tight against the nausea. Turning back to the screen, Rebecca pulls up an impressive list of stats. She's dealing with a murder investigation under Ian Reeves, another senior associate close to retirement. Rebecca has been gathering info to support their case that this was a mistaken identity.

I'd be impressed if I wasn't also about to spew lunch all over the conference table.

Marty, directly across from me, picks at a loose ball of burrata cheese. My mouth waters in protest and I start to stand.

"Excuse me. Sorry. I'll be right back."

Ignoring Chris's eyes on me, I skirt the back of the room, exit, and practically jog to the bathroom. Luckily, I make it to the stall before lunch comes right back up.

The stall door swings open behind me; I hadn't had time to lock it. Knees braced on the cold tile, heels sticking out oddly, I retch again and almost miss Saskia's timid voice.

"Autumn? Are you okay?"

There's no way she doesn't see me beneath the stalls, so I sigh, one hand holding onto the wall and the other to the toilet roll holder.

"I'm fine, Saskia. Just not feeling well."

Her flats slap on the floor as she comes farther in. "Are you sure? Do you want me to call anyone, or get someone?"

Chris, I almost say. But my stomach twists again at the thought of him.

Is it just nerves? The last few days we've both been on edge. After running off to Fishkill—stupidly, I can now admit—and the confrontation back at Chris's house, it wouldn't be surprising if I just couldn't handle the pressure.

You're a lawyer. All you know is pressure. One man shouldn't intimidate you more than the dozens of cases you've worked in your career.

"No, I'm alright. I just need a minute. And I might head out once I get cleaned up. I'm going to work from home for the rest of the day."

Saskia shifts and fidgets. "Okay. I can let Mr. Sharpe know, if you want?"

"Don't worry about that, I'll text him before I leave. Thank you, though."

Luckily, my team already presented the two cases we're dealing with this month. I dodged a bullet, even if the bitterly sour taste in my mouth doesn't feel like it.

What the hell is going on? There's no way I'm so nervous to be around Chris that it's literally making me sick. And lunch...well, that came up almost exactly as it went down. No way it could've caused food poisoning in the fifteen minutes since I ate it.

The bathroom door closes and I'm alone again, forehead warm and hands clammy.

"Maybe it's just that time of year," I murmur to myself, trying to take my mind off another flipping sensation in my gut. It is almost winter, and this is when everyone starts getting sick.

After a few minutes, I'm able to stand and get my balance. These damn heels.

In the bathroom mirror, I smooth my hands over the luckily not-too-tight skirt that hits right below my knees. It looks a little mussed up from kneeling on the tile floor, but there's nothing that can be done for it.

Peering closer at my reflection, I look for any signs of...what? The flu? I can't even remember the last time I had it. Probably when I was still living at home with my dad, as he was slowly drinking himself to death.

My face is pale, my normally plump cheeks looking a little hollow.

There's a dullness to my skin that I don't like.

Maybe I should reach out to Chris now. See if he'll bring me to an urgent care to get checked out.

But no, he's already done so much. I chuckle darkly at the thought; he's done *more* than enough. I'm living with the man, for heaven's sake. And he spent at least a few hours Saturday night pouring over Stephen's court documents, not to mention the few calls he made Sunday. Quiet, under the radar, but I noticed.

He didn't update me with any news. Is that good or bad?

With a sigh, I remind myself that the legal world is slow-moving. Just because he offered to take a closer look at Stephen's case and see if anything was missed doesn't mean he'll actually *find* anything.

I glance down at my watch. It's just after 2 p.m. At least that's a semi-acceptable time to leave the office early.

Straightening out my blouse, I make a last-ditch effort and pinch my cheeks. Barely any color rises to the surface.

Okay. So, home, and I'll order soup—something simple I can keep down.

As I take a deep breath, double-check that the nausea is gone for now, and head toward the door, the thought of going *home* is calming. Even if it's not my home.

Frank is there, and the couch, although it looks luxurious, is surprisingly comfortable. Maybe I'll throw on a nostalgic movie, try to keep something down, and doze off. Giving polite smiles to the coworkers I pass on my way out, I try to ignore the fact that I'm getting way, way too comfortable with having Chris Sharpe in my life.

Chapter 24

Chris

A week passes and I'm acutely aware of how little progress I've made. Work is busy, with the Waters case at a frustrating standstill. They want to try and negotiate, and Mr. Waters is considering it. I'm trying not to push him, but it's the last thing I'd want for them. That girl deserves justice, not a monetary Band-Aid that will do nothing for her trauma.

I find myself in my own kitchen, barely breathing, listening for signs of life from Autumn's bedroom. That's how I've come to think of it now—as hers. I can't imagine anyone else taking her place there.

From my sneaky vantage point, I see the door nudge open. Breath held, I watch...

Frank dips out of the room, tail wagging at the sight of me. He comes looking for his food bowl, which I quietly fill and place on the floor for him.

"Hey, boy. Morning. What's your mom up to?"

She's right on his tail, traipsing out in a nightgown that drives me crazy. It's nothing sultry, silky, or revealing. That's the whole appeal. Autumn is wearing an ankle-length, thin lavender nightgown that stretches over her curves as she moves. My eyes drag down her body and I can't help but wonder what's under it.

On impulse, I round the kitchen island and walk right up to her.

She stops, surprised by how close I am, hands coming to rest on my chest.

“Chris?”

Dipping down, I capture her lips and bury the rest of her question between us. Autumn sways, off balance, and I press my hands against the small of her back, hugging those curves to me. Putting everything I wish I could say to her into the kiss, losing myself in a haze of her scent and feel.

When we finally break apart, she’s looking up at me with heavy-lidded eyes.

This probably isn’t smart. She must want some distance. What are you thinking?

Before I can spiral any further, she licks her bottom lip and peeks up at me with a shy gaze.

“That was...a nice way to wake up.”

One corner of my mouth quirks up in an ecstatic grin. This is going so well that...

“Will you do something with me today? Come with me somewhere?”

Gently, I squeeze the curve of her waist through the thin cotton of the gown. She sways on her feet again, squinting up at me suspiciously.

“Hmm. Depends. Where? And can Frank come?”



“I CAN’T BELIEVE he slept the whole time.”

Autumn turns to look into the back seat at Frank, who is happily passed out on his back, on a very expensive blanket. I grin in the rearview at the sight.

“I’m not. You took him on the longest walk ever, Autumn. I was starting to get worried you weren’t coming back.”

She smiles nervously, eyes darting away from mine. “Can’t say it didn’t cross my mind.”

“Oh, come on. It isn’t going to be that bad.”

“I know, I just...I’m not great with family get-togethers.”

The discomfort in her voice breaks my heart. Reaching over the center console, I put a hand on her thigh reassuringly. “You’re fine. Besides, my family is a bit of an enigma. We only found out that Jenson existed a little over a year ago.”

Well, I did—and then I held off on telling Nathan...but I don’t mention

that mess to Autumn, not wanting to overwhelm her before we reach Cambridge. She's been fretting for the entire three-and-a-half-hour ride.

"You're sure this isn't a fancy dinner?" She's running her hands over her jeans nervously, picking at a worn spot.

"It is definitely *not* a fancy dinner."

"Hmph. Okay. It's just, with three brothers, all of whom are billionaires..."

"Yeah, I know. But you have to remember—humble beginnings." I give her a cheesy grin that makes her laugh and tell her about the diner Nate and I used to frequent, trying to take her mind off her nerves as we pull onto Jenson's street.

The driveway is tight with their cars as well as Nate's, but I maneuver in carefully, get out, and wait for Autumn to open the back door. If I had to guess, I'd say Frank is going to be her security blanket tonight.

The front door of the town house opens and Mel is standing there, absolutely beaming. "Come in!" Despite her massive smile, she shoots me a warning glance.

One that says, *You didn't tell either of your brothers you were bringing someone. You're probably in trouble.*

And unless Jenson filled her in, she has no idea just how *much* trouble.

"This is Autumn," I introduce her in the doorway, trying to maneuver around the happy mutt at our knees. "And this is Frank. Oh, Frank —"

Milo appears at his mother's side, gaping and then laughing as Frank gives him a huge kiss. Mel laughs and picks him up.

"The boys are supposed to be watching him, but Jenson got that new grill. Between you and me, neither one of them can figure it out."

We file into the house, Autumn tucking herself in close to me as she looks around.

"Really? I would've thought they'd have Gen showing them the ropes by now."

"Oh, no. She's kicked back with Roux, watching the bewilderment play out."

We all chuckle and head through the house to the back patio, lit with string lights and comfortably furnished with lounge chairs and massive cushions. Eva is curled up in one and shouts, "Uncle Chris!" as soon as I walk out.

She darts toward me, wrapping me in a rib-crushing hug. I make an

embarrassingly unmanly sound and try to hug her back, picking her up and spinning her.

“There’s my little monster!”

But she quickly latches on to Frank, her eyes wide as she fusses over the happy dog. I introduce the two of them and Autumn watches with a quiet smile as Eva giggles at the sloppy dog kisses.

Nate and Jenson are completely frozen by the grill, eyes glued to Autumn. Gen is watching them suspiciously, as is Melanie, who still has Milo on her hip. I wonder what the chances are they’re thinking their husbands are lovestruck. Probably pretty good; Autumn is a gorgeous woman.

I raise my brows at them and they both seem to snap out of it.

“Nate, Jenson, this is Autumn.”

There’s a tense, heavy moment. One I’ve been dreading the entire drive here.

Both of my brothers warned me away from Autumn. Especially when we discovered she was lying about her identity.

But now that they’re faced with her, they wouldn’t make a scene, right?

“Welcome,” Jenson finally spits out. But the two wives share a look—they know something’s up. I wouldn’t want to be either of my brothers later tonight...

“Hello,” Nate throws in, rounding the grill to greet her properly. He holds out a hand and Autumn grips it, giving it a good shake. I grin, proud of her—she’s all lawyer right now, standing tall and serious in the face of an otherwise intimidating man.

Nate notices, eyes narrow, and seems to approve. He reaches out to clap me on the back.

“Brother.”

I nod and head over to the grill, the trio of us staring down at it.

“It’s for barbecuing,” Jenson explains. He sounds just a little perplexed, and my grin widens.

“You know that usually takes hours, right?” It’s just after four now, close to when we’d normally eat around five.

From her place at the patio table, Gen rolls her eyes and sighs. She, Mel, and Autumn were chatting politely after friendly introductions. Now, she hands baby Roux over to Autumn, who takes the infant with a surprised look.

“Alright, you three, get out of my way. You’re lucky Mel had the sense to

marinate the chicken ahead of time.”

We scatter good-naturedly, and I take a beer from Jenson, heading over to Autumn’s side to sit next to her on the loveseat. She has Roux on one thigh and is looking down tenderly at the blonde baby.

“You okay?” I whisper as Frank nudges the baby’s toes, making her giggle.

Autumn’s smile is so wide that I’m worried her face might split right in two. She looks over at me with shining eyes, looking for all the world like she belongs *right here*, and nods.

“I’m perfect. Thank you for this.”

Chapter 25

Autumn

It's late by the time we reach the city limits, a full moon lighting up the roadways before us. Frank is passed out in the back again as Chris carefully turns onto back streets he has memorized until I start to recognize our surroundings. His dark house looms out of the night, glass windows reflecting the moonlight beautifully.

Uncharacteristically, he gets out and doesn't come to my side to open the door—something I've come to expect. With a frown, I watch him hurry up the stairs to the front door and slip into the house.

"Weird," I mutter, vaguely amused. What more could he have in store for me today? When he kissed me this morning, that was spontaneous enough. In fact, left in the daze of that kiss, I had my *own* plans for the day...mostly involving us cooped up in his bedroom for the duration.

But when he asked me to go to his brother's birthday dinner, I thought he was completely insane. I didn't know his family and didn't want to encroach. And as much as he insisted it wouldn't be strange, I could tell by everyone's surprised demeanor that they hadn't been expecting a complete stranger to show up.

Or maybe just that they hadn't been expecting *me*...

As I get Frank out of the back, I think back to Nathan and Jenson's expressions.

Recognition. It was unmistakable, though I'm sure I've never met either one of them.

Frank lopes into the house and I follow, closing and locking the door behind me. Then a clatter catches my attention, and I frown.

“Chris?”

“Give me a minute!”

His voice is muffled, coming from down the hallway in the back of the house. I put down my purse and feel the tension from meeting strangers ease out of my muscles. Frank drinks a bunch of water, then goes and curls up on his bed in the living room, passing out almost immediately.

Another commotion sounds from down the hall.

“Um...are you okay in there?”

As I walk toward the bedrooms, the sound of rushing water draws me toward his room. The light is on and I peer in.

Chris pops out of the bathroom, looking somehow both exhausted and excited.

“Hey! Come in.”

I huff out a laugh, shoulders sagging. “Chris, I really can't take any more surprises today.”

But I let him herd me into the room, his hands ghosting over my hips in a way that makes me shiver. He leads me to the bathroom—which is lit with a few candles and a wonderful lavender smell. My eyelids droop immediately at the calming scent.

“What is all this?”

He's a flurry of nervous movement, shifting some of the candles around and placing a fluffy towel on the counter.

“I thought you might want to relax after today. I did drag you right into the thick of things, after all.”

I can't help smiling and letting him gently tug my shirt out of the top of my jeans. His hand slips beneath, along my skin, settles at my back as he pulls me toward him.

I pop up on the tips of my toes, wanting to continue the kiss from this morning. He's right, it was a stressful day—unexpected, spontaneous, and also wonderful. I haven't felt so surrounded by family and a sense of acceptance in a long time.

It makes me want to lose myself in him.

He chuckles, lips ghosting over mine.

“Not yet. Bath first. Take your time. I’m going to bring you a glass of wine.”

Chris slips out of the room and leaves me there to finish undressing by myself, wishing his hands were the ones tugging off my jeans and unclasping my bra. But as soon as I set foot in the warm water, I moan, muscles relaxing, nipples peaked at the sudden change in temperature.

He comes back minutes later with the promised glass of wine and one for himself. Settling up against the counter, we chat about the day, Chris’s gaze dipping down to the froth of bubbles every now and then as I rub a cloth gently over my skin and sigh in the hazy room.

Once the laughter and reminiscing dies away, I start to feel myself drift off when he asks softly, “Did it bother you? Being around them?”

My head comes up, hair swinging against my jaw, damp at the ends.

“What? No. They’re wonderful, why would you ask that?”

He shrugs. “You said you weren’t always comfortable in family settings. I just wanted to be sure.”

Leaning forward, I reach out and lightly run my hand up the back of his calf. He shivers; I see it and he knows I do, his mouth set in a serious and sad line.

“It is hard, sometimes, to see happy families. To miss my own.” Now it’s my turn to shrug. “But it’s also hard to *not* be happy around people like your family, Chris. Eva is wonderful. I love that she wants to be a vet someday. And Roux...”

I smile, dipping my face down to the bubbles to hide it, but Chris sees. We’re both thinking of the conversation we had in the restaurant that night before Kieran ruined the moment. My confession that I wanted kids someday, something I rarely let myself think about. But holding Roux...I could imagine it. A little chubby body tucked up against mine, smelling sweet, all soft skin and cooing sounds.

Standing, I ignore the water sheeting down my body and turn my gaze on Chris. He raises his brows and reaches for the towel, but I stop him, biting my lip.

Stepping out of the tub carefully, I close the short distance between us. Chris is still leaning on the counter, and I move between his thighs with my naked, wet body, bubbles and froth soaking into the dark fabric of his jeans.

His eyes travel down my bare skin. He licks his lips, puts his wine glass aside, and places a hand on each side of my ribs. His thumbs rub slow circles

just below my breasts, making my breath catch.

Leaning forward, Chris buries his face in my neck. I tip my head back and close my eyes, loving the feel of him pressed against me—the friction of his jeans at my core.

As if he read my mind, he reaches between us and slips two fingers along my pussy, teasing and pressing and tugging until I'm slick with want.

“Please,” I whimper, arching my breasts toward him. He obliges and peppers them with kisses and licks, backing me up until he's standing, guiding me carefully out of the bathroom and into the bedroom.

My feet leave wet prints along the floor. Moonlight spills into the room from the windows, highlighting the plane of his muscles and shadowing the dips of his body as he pulls off his shirt first and then kicks off his jeans.

Left in just his boxers, it's obvious how badly he wants this, too. He's rock-hard as I run my palm over his erection, and his cock throbs toward my touch.

Unable to help myself, I get on my knees and pull the boxers off. His dick springs out and my mouth waters, but before I can lean forward and take him between my lips, Chris grips my chin and shakes his head.

“No. No time for that tonight. Come here.”

He pulls me to my feet and leads me to the bed, where he lies back and guides me over him. My thighs settle over his hips and I want so badly to slip down onto him, to feel him fill me.

We're both breathing hard already, barely having touched. Chris leans up to meet me halfway and steals a kiss. His hands guide my hips, shifting me until the head of his cock nudges my entrance, and just like that, pleasure warms through every inch of me.

I let out a long sigh and sink down onto him. I'm so wet that I can feel it between us, just like I can feel the delicious way he's stretching me. Chris puts one hand flat on my belly and with the other, grips my ass, showing me the rhythm he wants.

Pleasing him is a rush of adrenaline that I haven't experienced before. With his groans and gasps as guidance, I only get more and more turned on riding him, my knees sinking into the firm mattress and his hand pressing firmly, low on my belly. It does something strange to me, heightens the pressure and pleasure, and I pick up the pace without realizing, grinding down so that my clit rubs against his taut abs.

Chris sits up and wraps an arm around my hips. He fucks up into me as I

plunge down, my pussy squeezing and fluttering around his length as I start to lose my vision, shutting my eyes tightly as the orgasm rockets through me.

My toes curl, nipples tighten, and every hair on my head buzzes with the electric feeling of *him*.

Mine, mine, mine.

Chris curses, comes, and locks onto my bucking hips so tightly that I whimper, unable to move. He's panting against my chest as I try to catch my own breath, both of us still high on the feeling and shivering in ecstasy.

With a deep breath, Chris rolls us over and lies lazily between my legs. I'm too satiated and exhausted to comment on the mess we must be making of the comforter, not to mention ourselves.

His hands roam my body languidly and my fingers tangle in his hair. I'm half asleep when he lifts his head and more lucid than I expect, says, "Come to Nate's wedding with me."

Somewhere in the very, *very* back of my mind an alarm is going off. A warning.

Something about not getting too close.

Something about Chris being the enemy.

But my mind is too clouded with happiness to worry about what might be wrong. I hum and give him a tired smile, agreeing before I realize it. Content just to be here with him.

Chapter 26

Chris

First thing Monday, before I've even powered up the computer, my office phone rings. The detective's name comes up in all caps.

"Hey, Jacobson. What can I do for you?"

I'm hoping it's news that McCarty has finally decided to plead guilty to the crime, instead of dragging this trial out and traumatizing Marie Waters anymore.

Jacobson sighs. "I just wanted to give you a heads-up. There was an incident last night, and I passed your name on—so you might be getting a call."

"An incident? Anything you can tell me *before* that call comes in?"

"An assault. It was down at The Parlour, not sure if you're familiar?"

"I'm not; is it some kind of club, or..."

"A bar. A dive bar with a fancy name. Not in a great part of town, but it's on the outskirts of the university, so popular with college kids. A girl named Alex Gilmore is pretty beat up. She was left out back behind the building."

"If you're calling me, I'm assuming there are suspects?"

"Not quite. It's jumping the gun on that, but my team is reviewing the footage today. Right now, it's looking pretty serious. Someone tried to slit her throat. Alex put up a fight and we found a knife nearby. The perp had to be aiming to kill her, and he came pretty close. She won't be able to talk for a

while.”

A black hole opens up in my chest.

A bar...a knife...a woman left out back.

It’s too coincidental. Or is it? This is New York City, after all, and it’s not as if bar fights and assaults aren’t semiregular here.

“Okay. I appreciate the heads-up. Can you send the footage over? I’d like to get an idea of what I’m working with.”

“Course. Give me a few and it’ll be in your inbox.”

“Thanks. I’ll have a team ready in case you guys find someone in the next few days.”

I hang up and sit in silence for a few moments, letting the possibilities sink in. It takes everything in me not to call Autumn into the office immediately.

After all, they don’t even have any suspects yet.

Trying to do anything but wait, I start digging through my current work for a distraction. But it doesn’t come; my mind keeps drawing a line from this crime to the night Autumn told me about.

A girl behind a bar, her brother’s knife in her ribs. The slit throat.

That’s a very specific way to kill someone.

My cell pings and I grab it, tapping on the email notification. Jacobson forwarded an eight-minute long clip. Hunched over my phone, it’s as if the rest of the room and the crisp winter day disappear.

The bar is short and crowded, but my eyes immediately seek out a group of young women. They all look so vibrant and happy, but one stands out in particular. Her hair is cut short. It reminds me of Autumn’s and a pang of fear shoots through my heart.

After about two minutes of the girls chatting and waiting on drinks, three men approach them. It’s obvious what’s happening—the girls tighten up their group, turning backs and shoulders to the men. The footage is fuzzy and the men aren’t facing the camera.

But then one turns to look across the room.

Hollowed cheeks. The posture.

Without watching the last two minutes of the clip, I dial Autumn’s office. She picks up quickly, clearly confused.

“Yes?”

“Autumn, I’m going to need you to come up to my office. There’s something you need to see.”

“Okay...” She hesitates, and for a moment I think she might ask what it’s about. But then the phone clicks.

My entire body tenses as I wait. Instead of it being a relief when she steps into the room, my throat goes dry.

“Close the door, please.”

She blinks, features settling into a serious expression as she obeys and then walks slowly toward the desk.

“Here. Look at this. Tell me if you recognize anyone.”

I hand her my phone and wait. The footage is completely silent with no audio. Autumn’s eyes move across the screen and I know she’s taking in the bar scene, the group of girls.

The men approaching.

Her face goes slack.

“Is that...?”

“You tell me.”

Her eyes snap up and meet mine. The color drains from her face, and I stand to guide her to a chair, taking the phone from her before it falls out of her grip.

“What happened?” Her voice is detached, careful, but there’s an edge of fear to it that only I can hear.

“I’ll tell you soon. First, is that Kieran? The man who turns and looks back across the bar?”

“I...I don’t know.”

Sighing in frustration, I prop myself against the desk. “Autumn, I need you to look again, then.”

Slowly, she shakes her head. “No, I...I don’t need to. I think it’s him.”

The tension leaves my body. Now that I have an answer, I can start putting the pieces together.

“Okay. This is going to be hard to hear, but something happened last night.”

As I repeat all the information Jacobson gave me, Autumn’s eyes become unfocused and it’s almost as if she’s not in the room with me. I explain the girl, Alex Gilmore, that she’s in the hospital with a serious injury to the throat. That a knife was found.

When Autumn finally meets my gaze again, it’s obvious she’s put the pieces together, too.

“You think Kieran did this to her?”

“I think this footage shows that he and his buddies were interested in these girls, and the girls rebuffed them. I think...I think Kieran has a history of being violent. You’ve hinted so yourself.”

Autumn’s cheeks flush in embarrassment. Jaw set, I drop to my knees in front of her and take her hands.

“Hey. Look at me.” It takes her a second, but she finally does, as if she can’t look away. “Whatever he did to you wasn’t your fault, Autumn. You didn’t deserve it. Men like Kieran...they have a sway over people. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

She chews her lip for a second and then bursts out, “He couldn’t have done that.”

“Are you sure? Really sure? Because if he did, Autumn, it means that all those years ago...”

Her brows knit as she shakes her head again. “I just...I can’t believe he’d do something like that to someone.”

“Okay. But you don’t think Stephen did it either, right?”

“I *know* Stephen didn’t do it!”

There’s my girl. The fire is back in her eyes as she straightens in the chair, pulling one hand out of my grip. I give her a small, encouraging grin.

“And I believe you. If Stephen didn’t do it, then we have to look at other possibilities. And this is just too coincidental.”

Standing, I fill her in on the next steps—Jacobson’s team looking to identify suspects. Alex Gilmore potentially reaching out.

“If Kieran’s name comes up, or they find something to connect him...”

She nods reluctantly, understanding. Reaching out, I tuck a piece of her hair back.

“I know you don’t want to believe this about someone you loved once, Autumn, but we both know Kieran is a dangerous man. Maybe he’s capable of worse things than you realize. But I promise I’ll get this figured out, okay?”

Her hand is still in mine as she stands, her eyes on our intertwined fingers. She looks up at me, her eyes a storm of emotions. But she presses up on her toes and kisses me lightly. So lightly I almost think I imagine it.

Chapter 27

Autumn

“Let me come with you.”

Chris’s eyes flash as he looks up from gathering his things. His cell is still on the screen with the newest footage. I can’t look at it.

“No. It’s better if you stay here.”

I rush to follow him as he strides toward the door, his shoulders set.

“Chris. I *need* to be there. I need to see.”

See what? The voice in my head scoffs. *See your murderous ex?*

A few more days of digging got the detectives what they needed. A camera at the back of the bar caught the girl, Alex, stepping out back for a cigarette. Seconds later, the man I’m now sure was Kieran followed her out.

Hand on the doorknob, Chris turns to face me.

“Autumn, this isn’t going to be easy. You know what this is; it’s going to be a confrontation. Kieran won’t be happy to see me.”

“He agreed to see you, though.”

“He did. Because he’s curious. If Kieran’s anything more than an idiot, he realizes that you’re mine, Autumn. He knows I’m not going down there to offer my services. I want to try to get some answers out of him while I still have time, and the detectives are doing me a favor.”

“What happens if he decides not to answer?” I ask, following him anxiously into the hallway where firm employees curiously glance our way.

Chris's eyes scan the area as he notices, too.

Turning, he puts his briefcase down and grips my shoulders.

"You know the answer to that, Autumn. You're a lawyer. A good one." His eyes bore into mine, and all of a sudden, I feel grounded in a way that I haven't for the past few days. I've barely slept, tossing and turning all night, half afraid that Kieran would come in through the window.

Taking a deep breath, I get a hold of myself and hope he sees it.

"Okay. You're right. But I need to come, Chris." I lower my voice, stepping closer so that our conversation is more private. "I need to face him. At least from the other side of the glass."

For a tense moment he appears closed off, eyes searching my face.

Then he nods.

"Fine. But you're not talking to him, and I want you to stay out of sight. I don't want him to know you're there."

Heart in my throat, I agree and we head quickly toward the parking garage.



SEEING Kieran this close still feels a little too real.

He's about six feet away on the other side of glass. He can't see me, but it feels like he can sense me. The smirk on his face—it's so different from Chris's. Menacing instead of teasing. There's still a promise in it, but not one I want to cash in on.

Seeing these two men in the same room—one I used to love, and the one I—well, I don't want to think about that right now. It sends my heart crashing in my chest, beating against my ribs as if it'll burst.

This Chris Sharpe is exactly who I imagined him to be back when I still hated him. He sits across from Kieran and is the picture of a heartless shark. Cold. Uncaring. His eyes, which I've spent so much time staring into, are flat and black.

And though, on the surface, it might seem like Kieran is unaffected, I know him well enough to see how nervous he is. His right knee jiggles under the table even as he grins at Chris, and he's picking at the jagged scar that runs from his wrist to his elbow.

"This is a courtesy."

The first words out of Chris's mouth make Kieran laugh, but it's a crazed and shaky laugh.

"A courtesy? Pretty sure I'm doing *you* the courtesy by agreeing to see you."

Silence. It drags out long enough for Kieran's knee to start jiggling again. Although he doesn't show it, I'm sure Chris notices, and he takes this moment to continue.

"You have one chance to tell me what happened at The Parlour."

The grin widens into a smirk. Kieran sits back. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. I know the detectives have already shown you the footage. You know what happened to Alex Gilmore that night."

"Oh, the girl on the news? I didn't have anything to do with that." He shrugs, a callous trait that's so familiar to me, a shiver runs down my spine. "But you know women, if someone decided to teach her a lesson, she must've deserved it."

That shiver bristles back into a rod of indignant outrage. All the times he ever hit me, choked me, surge through my mind, and my hands grip the ledge of the mirror window tightly.

"No woman deserves what happened to Alex," Chris says in a menacing whisper. Kieran stills. "If you saw the news, then you know she survived. There'll be hell to pay for whoever did that to her."

Kieran sneers, looks away. Another characteristic I recognize, and my shoulders drop. The conversation ends here. He won't talk anymore about the girl or the bar.

Chris seems to sense this and changes topics.

"Tell me why you're stalking Autumn Cooper."

That has Kieran's attention again. His lips shift from a sulk to a smirk again.

"So, you know her real last name. On your firm's website, she's listed as Autumn *Cavendish*. Can you believe that shit? As if anyone would believe she's something more than white trash —"

Chris's fist hits the table once. Hard.

His chest rises in a deep breath, the loss of control gone just as quickly as it appeared.

Kieran is considering Chris with fresh eyes. He's propped back in his chair, that surly look back on his face, like a young lion beaten out by a

dominant.

“You know a lot about her, huh? She tell you everything?”

My stomach twists with alarming butterflies. I’m terrified Chris will give Kieran the attitude right back—tell him just how *well* he knows me. Every inch of me.

Instead, Chris stays calm and only gives Kieran a fleeting glance. He seems disinterested, unfazed. In the beats of silence, Kieran is working himself up again, scowling. The hollows of his cheeks deepen and from here it’s easy to see that some of his teeth have rotted.

“You seeing her tonight? Taking her out to dinner again? A girl like Autumn in that restaurant. She can keep pretending, but you can’t put lipstick on a pig, man. She’ll always be trash.”

This time Chris doesn’t react. There’s a triumphant gleam to his eyes as Kieran keeps ranting.

“Autumn and me were together for a *long* time, man. She knows me. She knows what I’m capable of.” He leans forward, less than a foot between them now over the tabletop. “You tell her that if she says anything, I’m coming for her. I’ll finish her off if she opens that pretty little mouth of hers.”

“Aside from empty threats, is there anything else you want to say?”

A flat, dead tone, just like his expression. Kieran eases into a slow, frustrated sneer again.

“No.”

Turning away from the window, I let out a forceful exhale. I was holding my breath the whole time and didn’t even realize. With my hand over my mouth, I walk out of the observation room and into the hallway to pace.

Chris appears moments later. He looks tired and serious, but...warmer. It’s a relief. I practically fall into his arms, not caring about the passing looks we get from detectives and admin as they move through the building.

Kieran is still here, and the thought makes me shiver.

“Are you okay?”

Chris’s voice rumbles through his chest, calming me. I nod, but it’s half-hearted, and we both know I’m anything but okay.

Chris pushes me back gently and peers down. “Do you have any idea what he meant by that? Him not wanting you to tell me something?”

Shaking my head, I try to jog my memory, but it’s lost in a fog of anxiety and disbelief. What the hell could Kieran be talking about?

What could I know that’s so bad he feels the need to...

“I won’t let him near you. You know that, right?”

Chris’s hands smooth down my arms, soothing my nerves.

Then, everything shifts. His face is a mask once more.

I pull back, brows knit, confused.

“You need to tell me everything, Autumn. The truth this time.”

That chill is back in his voice. It’s like cold water being poured over my body, and I go completely still, shocked.

“What?”

“You’re not telling me something. You’re leaving something out. And I need to know what it is, right now.”

Just moments ago, I felt completely safe in his arms.

But with his dark eyes drilling into me, I feel the way any person who’s ever faced him on the stand must feel—cracked open, exposed, and scared.

Chapter 28

Chris

Autumn's mouth is open in a little *O* of shock.

I can feel pieces of myself crumbling inside, but there's no other choice. I've been fighting against the lawyer I am for months now, and it's time to learn the truth.

Her mouth snaps shut audibly.

"I need to know what's really going on, Autumn, before I take this any further. I think it's obvious at this point that my reputation is on the line if I pursue this without just cause."

I can see the battle raging behind her eyes. She knows I'm right, because the same truth-seeker is in *her*. Which is why it's killing me that she's hiding something.

I want to believe her. I want to trust her.

My brothers were right. I can't.

Autumn crosses her arms and paces away from me, the jumpsuit she's wearing tight at her shoulders, cinched at the waist. She looks as beautiful as always. But today she looks like a storm.

Her short hair is as wild as her eyes. Her lips are swollen from her worrying them.

"I can't trust you. What's the point of going this far only to cut everything off?"

When she turns, her eyes are like daggers, her words like claws.

“You know why. We *both* know.”

“You’re more worried about your reputation than whether or not my brother really committed that crime, or if the murderer is right in the other room, about to go free!” Autumn scoffs, arms tightening around herself protectively.

“It’s not like that. Without my reputation, I can’t keep doing what I’m doing. I can’t put the bad guys away. You’ve been keeping something from me, Autumn.”

“I have no idea what he’s talking about!” Her tone is half pleading and a part of me believes her. But I lock that part away, needing to focus on facts.

“You had to know I’d wonder eventually. It’s all too convenient—you start working for me twelve years after I put your brother away. Your ex comes looking for you, threatening your life. I’m roped into it now and I need to know why this is all happening.”

“*I don’t know*. If I did, don’t you think I’d be able to get Stephen out myself? I don’t know what Kieran thinks I know or what he thinks I told you. I don’t know why he showed up.”

“But why did *you* show up, Autumn? Why did you suddenly insert yourself into my life?”

I close the gap between us in two long strides, bearing down on her—wanting the truth and wanting to forget about it all in the same moment. Wanting nothing more than to take her away from this, to keep my promise that she’ll be safe. To give her a life she deserves.

As much as I hate his words, there was something to what Kieran said. Autumn Cavendish is a capable, strong, competent woman. A lawyer to be reckoned with. Not that Autumn Cooper isn’t, but there’s something wild about Autumn Cooper. She’s a fighter determined to survive, something most people don’t ever have to become.

She’s been through so much.

So how did she end up at Sharpe Law?

Her eyes search my face, almost begging, but then she sneers.

Steps back.

“You want to know why I showed up here? Why I applied for a senior position at your firm? Fine. I wanted to make you pay for what you did to Stephen.”

It’s like a slap in the face.

I stare at her in shock. She watches me defiantly, waiting for my reaction. For what, though? Anger, like her ex? Closing down, like her brother?

“I don’t understand. You wanted to make me pay? How?”

Her eyes sweep away. “I don’t know. I wanted...I thought...I was sure you were doing something wrong. Defending the wrong people, putting more innocent people in prison. I thought if I could just get on the inside and see —”

“What? You thought you’d find some hidden secret? That I’m taking advantage of my clients, or pouring the firm’s money into my own bank account?”

It hurts, even though it’s not like those accusations haven’t been hinted at before. None of it is true. I’m a billionaire, yes, but that’s secondary. It just so happens I’m very, very good at what I do.

“Something like that,” she mutters, unable to meet my eyes.

My heart, beating in my chest, aches painfully. For a second, I think I might have a heart attack right here in the precinct. It wouldn’t be the worst thing, because I can’t imagine how to move forward from this.

The woman I love thinks I’m a liar, a cheat, and a stuck-up asshole.

She only came into my life to destroy it.

“Come on.”

I can’t get the stiffness out of my tone. Autumn looks at me in surprise, like she expected a fight.

“What?”

“Come on. We’re going back. I’m going to drop you off at the firm and then I’m going home.”

“I...okay.”

She doesn’t argue, just follows me down the corridors, past the front desk, and out to the lot.

The car feels small and crowded even with just the two of us in it. There’s a mountain of words between us, but neither of us speaks.

I pull up outside Sharpe Law and see the security guards clock us. All of a sudden, I’m exhausted.

I just want to be alone.

Autumn puts her hand on the door handle, and then hesitates. She looks back like she’s going to say something.

What could make things better? What could patch the crack that ripped through everything I thought we were to one another?

She doesn't speak. Instead, she turns away, opens the door, and gets out.

I put the car in drive and feel like I left my heart somewhere in the grimy grid of New York City.

Chapter 29

Autumn

I stare at Saskia's text, letting it sink in. What it means.

Kieran Tate was released this morning. They didn't have anything to hold him.

Three little dots appear, as if Saskia wants to say more, or ask why I didn't show up to work this morning. It'd be a valid question; I've been locked away in the guest room at Chris's house since yesterday evening. When I got back from the office after taking an Uber to his house, unsure I'd still be welcome, the place was silent.

This morning was almost worse. He came to the door and asked in a muffled voice if I was riding in with him. When I told him I was taking a sick day, I could feel the tangled cloud of emotions on the other side of the thin door—I wanted to go out to him, to apologize, to cry, to beg, to be angry.

Instead, I just sat there, holding my breath, until he stalked away. The front door shut and I've been alone since.

Well, except for Frank. He whines and rolls over, giving me his belly to rub like he thinks it'll make me feel better. I wish it would.

Anything you want me to take care of today? Saskia's text appears on the screen.

I hesitate before typing out a succinct reply. **No thank you.**

I should say more. I should ask who told her to update me on Kieran, but

I already know—Chris, of course. No one else at the office has any idea who Kieran is, let alone how we're connected. Saskia must be wondering why the owner of the firm hunted her down and asked her to pass on that information.

I should be worried that Kieran is out after his threat yesterday. But oddly, I still feel safe ensconced in Chris's home. Even if it doesn't feel like I deserve to be here.

With a sigh, I get up and peer out of the room, as if someone else might be home. "Just us," I say to Frank.

In the kitchen, I start warming a small pot of chicken and dumpling soup from a jar. Some fancy brand I'd never buy for myself, but even Chris's ready-made meals are luxurious. My stomach aches with guilt and the thought of losing this. Not just the good food, but the now-familiar surroundings, the sound of Chris moving around the house, catching his smirk in the dim evening light, waking to the sound of him showering.

The way he gets on his knees in front of me.

The way he kisses me.

The way he looks at me.

The rush of nausea is suddenly overwhelming and I hurry to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before throwing up what little I ate this morning.

As I sit back and wait for the damp sweat covering my forehead to dry, I think about the fact that I've been sick more in the past week than I probably ever have in my whole life. My stomach isn't usually so weak, but it must be all the stress.

Making my way back to the kitchen, I grab my cell and send a quick text without thinking too hard about it.

Hey, can you come over?

Orla answers quickly.

Um—to Sharpe's house? Are you kidding?

He's not home. Just me and Frank. Please?

There's a beat before she replies: **How can I resist? Send me the address.**



HALF AN HOUR LATER, Orla stands in the foyer looking both annoyed and

impressed.

I give her a half-hearted smile. “Not quite the evil lair you pictured, huh?”

She crouches down to pet Frank, who pants happily at seeing his buddy.

“As much as I hate to admit it, Sharpe has pretty good taste.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

I give her a quick tour of the house, blushing when we glance in at Chris’s bed and then my own. She raises her brows at the guest room with my things strewn around it.

“Well, you seem to have made yourself comfortable.”

I’m at a crossroads here—I could lie and say I’m just taking advantage of a crappy situation, or I could spill everything. How comfortable I am here, how our physical relationship has only gotten more intense over the last weeks, how much he means to me now.

And of course, everything that’s happened with Kieran since yesterday.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed with a sigh, I give up and tell her all of it. There’s no point in lying. Chris already knows the truth.

By the time I’m done, Orla is staring at me in surprise.

“I just didn’t expect you to go so far.”

I wince. “I didn’t, either. It’s just, he’s so good at *tempting* me, and —”

She laughs, cutting me off. “I didn’t mean the sex, although, obviously, it wasn’t the chore you made it out to be at first, hmm?” Ignoring my blush, she continues, “I meant that you told Chris everything.”

“*He* doesn’t think I did,” I grumble.

“Right...about that. You really have no idea what Kieran meant? Why he threatened you?”

“No. No idea. He thinks I know something, but I don’t—and I can’t convince Chris of that right now.”

“You can’t really blame the guy. I mean, he just found out you were plotting his downfall before you two ever met. And from what I’ve seen and what you’ve been telling me lately, it sounds like he’s fallen head over heels for you, Autumn.”

Orla watches me seriously, waiting for my reaction. Hearing out loud the small suspicion that’s been growing in my heart for weeks now makes my shoulders slump.

“I shouldn’t have led him on.”

Orla leans back, making herself comfortable on the bed. “Well, that depends, doesn’t it?”

“On what?”

“On whether or not you feel the same.”

I laugh, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. It’s all a mess—desperate, sad, and funny at the same time.

“Do you?” she persists, eyes narrow. Orla knows me too well.

She knows what my answer is, even if I can’t say it out loud.

“It doesn’t matter,” I blurt out. “I ruined everything. He’s not who I thought he was, and now he doesn’t trust me.”

“Is he still helping you?”

“You mean, helping figure a way to get Stephen out? I don’t know.”

Guilt sweeps through my belly at the realization. I didn’t bother asking Chris yesterday if he’d still help me get Stephen’s name cleared. It’d be a miracle if he still believes my brother is innocent after everything I’ve lied about.

“You should find out. That would be very telling, Autumn. If he’s the kind of guy who sticks to his word after all this, you should hold onto him.”

I scoff. “Orla, really? A man like Chris Sharpe is *never* going to want a woman like me. It was just sex, right from the start.”

“Was it, though? Think about it—his track record with other women. They’re always one-night stands, aren’t they? And I doubt any of them ever *lived* with him. Plus, he’s right—he’s putting his reputation on the line here. Pretty willingly, it sounds like, which is what you had planned the whole time, anyway.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s looking for something permanent.”

“I don’t know. If you ask me, even after everything you’ve done to get away from your past, it still has a grip on you. You have to remember who you are, Autumn—you’re not just the teenager that Kieran used to beat up. You’re not helpless. You’re strong, and gorgeous, and Christopher Sharpe is in love with you.”

It finally hits me that she might be right.

And I’ve been talking myself out of it this whole time.

I look at her in surprise, lips parted —

And then lean over to throw up in the trash can by my bed.

With a groan, I wipe the sweat off my forehead and wait for my stomach to calm down, not even bothering to sit up.

“Autumn! Oh my God, are you okay? Have you been sick? You haven’t said anything!”

Orla helps me back up, pressing a hand to my head and frowning.

“Okay, you don’t have a fever...”

“I know, it’s not that. My stomach has just been off for a while.”

“Like, what do you mean by ‘off’?”

“I don’t know, sensitive, I guess? I get nauseous really easily. This is the second time I threw up today.”

Trying to straighten myself up and standing to clean up the mess, it takes a second for my gaze to catch on Orla’s startled eyes.

“Um, Autumn. Is there any chance...?”

She leaves the question hanging as I frown at her. It takes a second for me to realize just what she’s asking.

Oh, shit.

Chapter 30

Chris

“Uncle Chris, are you staying for dinner?”

Eva climbs up on the couch next to me, Brutus not far behind her. Gen comes over to take Roux, who’s fussing and ready to eat. She raises her brows, mirroring her daughter’s question.

“Um, I don’t think so, hon. I should probably get home.”

“Hmph.”

Gen turns away, shushing Roux as she goes, but shooting me a look over her shoulder.

I’ve spent the last two days hanging out at their house and evading questions about *why* I suddenly want to spend so much time with my big bro and his family. Eva is thrilled, obviously, and has been insisting that we reenact Rapunzel every few hours. Even Gen seemed relieved to have someone to hand the baby off to now and then.

But I can sense that I’m pushing my luck. Especially when Nate walks into the living room and tells Eva, “Can you give me and your uncle a few minutes to talk? Gen says she needs some help with dinner.”

Eva looks a little suspicious but hops off the couch to go help with dinner as Nate sits across from me in an armchair.

“Alright,” he deadpans. “What’s going on? What’s driven you away from home?”

“I haven’t been driven away from home,” I scoff, crossing my arms and legs and pretending that’s not a deeply defensive move. “I just figured I’d spend some time with you all before the wedding —”

“Oh, please. You’ve been distracted for the past two months, Chris. I know something is up. And I have a feeling it has to do with that woman Autumn.”

His use of *that woman* offends me, especially since they met. I open my mouth to defend Autumn, but snap it shut quickly.

With a sigh, I give in. “Alright. You’re right, I owe you an explanation.”

Over the course of the next twenty minutes, with Eva and Gen banging around in the kitchen, I spill. All of it. Autumn’s ex stalking and threatening her, inviting her to stay at my place (insisting, actually), and the hooking up, which was totally accidental. Nate rolls his eyes.

“Sure it was.”

“It *was*. I didn’t mean to...for it to...”

“Get serious?” he asks. “Just how serious is it, Chris? You do remember what we found out about her, right? Who she is?”

I purse my lips for a moment. But I’ve already come this far, so I fill him in on the rest—her visit to Stephen in prison, her confession, her insistence that he didn’t do it, and the similarities between *that* crime and the one that was just committed.

“Wait, her ex was on camera? In the same bar where another girl’s throat was slit?”

“Yeah. Almost the exact same MO. Weird, right?”

Nate goes back to his characteristic brooding, stroking a few-days-old scruffy chin that I’m curious if Gen will let him keep.

“I hate to say it, but it sounds like she’s on to something. You might’ve put away the wrong guy.”

I nod solemnly. “I know. With everything that’s happened, I’m pretty sure, at this point, that her ex is the one who committed both crimes. And I’m looking for a way to pin him. It’s just...”

Frustrated, I recount the day at the precinct, the words Kieran said. How adamant he was that Autumn knew something.

“Do you think she does?” Nate asks, tipping his head. I know my brother well enough to know he’s past his initial distrust of Autumn, and now he’s fully invested. He might be a generally distrusting guy, but he’s got a heart of gold. He’ll help her just as readily as I’m willing to.

“I don’t know. She says she doesn’t, and I think she’s telling the truth. But I’ve been so blind to everything. There’s a chance that I’m wrong and she’s playing me.”

Nate snorts. “More than she already has.”

We sit in silence for a while, both of us mulling things over. Then Nate waves his hand like he’s waving off an insect.

“Eh, none of it matters.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter if she knows something or not.”

“Sure, Nate. How do you figure?” I ask sarcastically, rolling my eyes.

“Well, either way, you’re certain Stephen Cooper didn’t kill that woman and Kieran Tate almost definitely did. In fact, it sounds like the evidence is adding up.”

“Right, I just need a nail in the coffin.”

“So whether or not Autumn knows something, you have a wrong to right.”

“Right...”

“And you’re in love with her.”

With a heavy sigh, I give in—there’s no point arguing this. Nate can see right through me.

“I am.”

“Okay. So have you told her that?”

“Of course not! Did you not just hear *everything* I’ve been dealing with for the last few weeks?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You keep saying that. It does, in fact, matter.”

“Why? Does it make you love her less?”

“No, but —”

“Then what’s your plan? Let her go? Keep living alone in that empty house and continue avoiding a real relationship and commitment?”

My mouth snaps shut. I glower at Nate, who gives me a smirk that I rarely see grace his lips.

“What’re you so afraid of, Chris?” It’s a serious question and one that goes right to the heart of the matter. I shift uncomfortably in the chair.

“I just don’t see how things could possibly work out.”

“For you and Autumn?”

“No, Autumn is wonderful. When all of this is behind her—she’s a sharp

lawyer, Nate. Brilliant. Competent. It'd be a blow if the firm lost her. And on a personal level, she's going to be an amazing mom someday."

"Okay, so again—what's keeping you from telling her you're in love with her? And the life you want?"

I clamp my mouth shut so hard it feels like my teeth might crack from trying to keep the words in that have been banging around in my head for months. Years, really. Long before Autumn.

"I just...I think I'll be a shitty dad."

Nate looks surprised. His hands grip the arms of the chair as we stare at one another. "What would make you think that?" he asks with a sympathetic tone.

I roll my eyes again, not wanting any of it. Putting my walls back up.

"Oh, come on, Nate. Look at where we came from, who our father figure was. Do you really think I have a shot at turning into a good dad?"

He levels me with a look. "Do you think *I'm* a shitty dad?"

"Wha—of course not! How could you even —"

"Exactly. I feel the same way about you saying it, Chris."

"But you *have* kids already, Nate. And you have Gen to keep you on the straight and narrow."

"And you'll have Autumn. You said it yourself, she's a strong woman. Do you really think she's going to let you slack off?"

A small smile lifts my lips at the thought. Her sharp eyes and the way she wrinkles her nose when she's calling bullshit on me.

"No."

"Alright. That settles it, then. You need to go home and tell her. And obviously, fix this whole situation with Stephen and Kieran. Put the right man behind bars." He shifts, rubbing at his chin again. "Are you worried about what it'll do to your career?"

"No," I answer honestly. "Not particularly. I've been toying with the idea of maybe taking a break. I own the company, after all, but I don't necessarily have to run it."

My brother nods solemnly. It's a similar move to the one he made a year ago when he stepped down from his construction company and started a small boutique carpentry shop instead. He seems happier, more content. I want something like that for myself.

"Well, you know what to do, then. Now, I love you, but please get the hell out of my house."

We both stand and Nate pulls me into a hug, slapping my back and squeezing tight. The breath goes out of me, partly because of his grip and partly out of relief.

For the first time in days, it finally feels like I have some sort of direction. A compass pointing me toward home.

Chapter 31

Autumn

Being back at my apartment should feel like home, but it doesn't.

In fact, it's worse under these circumstances. Orla is clutching a pregnancy test in her hand, mouth set. Frank, sensing the unease in the room, whines quietly at my feet.

I used to love this little space. Now, it feels claustrophobic and overwhelming. I love Orla, but her things strewn everywhere make me feel anxious and crowded.

My eyes dart to the timer on my cell phone. Fifty seconds. I clutch the pillow to my stomach tighter, wondering if there's the start of a new life inside my body.

Forty seconds.

I reach out and rub Frank's head to distract myself. After I got sick at Chris's, Orla realized sooner than I did what that might mean. She immediately started packing my bag as the possibilities set in.

Frank hadn't been thrilled with the rush of gathering everything, including his food and water bowl, and me frantically texting an Uber. I was sure at any second Chris would come home and ask me what the hell I was doing. Shake some sense into me. Of course I couldn't leave. Kieran was out there, waiting to teach me a lesson for information I didn't know I had.

The whole ride back into the city, the first few hours in the apartment, the

entire first day, I waited for a “where are you?” text. It never came.

Now, a full day and a half later, I finally let Orla talk me into taking a pregnancy test. There are three more on the table in front of us.

Ten seconds.

Orla purses her lips and shakes the pregnancy test, like that’ll make it go faster. I tighten my grip on the pillow, my mind echoing with a dozen contradictory emotions.

Do I want this?

I’m scared.

I’m excited.

What if—

Five. Four.

Three.

Two...

Orla stops shaking the test and looks at it. Neither of us are breathing.

“It’s positive.”

She whispers the words so quietly, I actually lean forward, but I know what I heard.

“Are you sure? Is it —”

I scramble for the box to check the instructions again as she drops back into a chair.

“I’m sure. You’re pregnant, Autumn.”

Why the hell do they make the print on these things so tiny? I squint, reread, then get up and snatch the test from her.

She’s right. There’s a little plus sign.

I stare at it as Orla watches me carefully. “Are you mad?” she asks. “Or happy, or...”

“Yes. I mean, I don’t know.” I groan in frustration, pacing the room with the test still in my hand. “I’m surprised, I guess.”

“Really.” She raises her brows. “You’re surprised after *everything* you two have been doing for the last couple of months?”

I shoot her a glare. “I’m on birth control, Orla.”

“Yeah, that’s not one hundred percent, Autumn. You should know that.”

I do know that. With another groan, I throw my head back, stalking across the room.

The logical, lawyer side of my brain is screaming, *This is a career ender!* The other side—the side I’ve kept quiet for the last almost-decade—is a little

relieved. *It can be over now. We don't have to keep pretending to be this badass bitch.*

Images flash through my mind. A nursery, all soft pinks and grays, light streaming in through a window.

It hits me that I'm picturing the guest bedroom at Chris's house.

"Oh, God. This is bad."

The moan I let out is feral, from deep in my gut. Orla leans forward, chewing on her lip.

"Hey, it's not like we can't fix this, Autumn. You have options. We can go down to a clinic, talk to someone..."

But before she finishes her sentence, I'm shaking my head.

Her eyebrows rise a second time.

"So...you want to keep it?"

My hand ghosts over my belly. How far along am I? She's right, Chris and I have had sex enough times that I can't know for sure without seeing a doctor. Another image flashes through my head—an ob-gyn exam room, the ultrasound machine, some ambiguous nurse. Thinking of facing that alone, my heart aches.

But would Chris ever...?

"Well, you can always leave the baby on Chris's doorstep once it's born. It's not like he can't provide for a child with all that money in the bank."

It's a low blow, even if she's joking, and I roll my eyes at her. "I don't think when he imagines his future kids, he was picturing knocking up a senior associate at the firm."

Her eyes narrow. "Wait...did you two talk about having kids? How do you know he wants kids?"

I glance her way guiltily. "I just do, okay? We had a lot of time to talk."

"Mm-hmm. So, not only are you two in love with each other—stop making that face, Autumn, we're not arguing about that right now—but you *know* he wants kids, and you just happen to be pregnant with his. Do you really think he'd be anything other than thrilled?"

"He can't know," I blurt out. "It's...I *work for him.*"

This is so, so bad.

Chapter 32

Chris

As soon as I step foot in the office Monday morning, I know something is off.

There's not quite a frenzy in the air, but aides and associates, as well as interns, are shooting nervous looks around as they stride through the hallways.

Marty walks by with a smirk, hips swaying. She's a little *too* confident, even for her.

Stepping into the elevator, I hit a button on a hunch. Not my floor—Autumn's.

It's borderline chaos, and right away, I can see it's centered around Autumn's team. Intentionally setting my features in stone, I move through the room and walk right up to their desks.

"Good morning. Can someone please tell me where Miss Cavendish is?"

Nervous glances all around again. A young male intern I haven't met yet pipes up, probably trying to get in good with the CEO despite delivering what can only be bad news.

"She quit."

Saskia stands up quickly, glaring at the guy. "Mr. Sharpe, sir, Miss Cavendish resigned early this morning. I'm sorry, we weren't aware, or we..."

She flounders, and I can almost read her mind. Or what? Or they would have told me?

Why would the CEO care so much about a senior associate, one of a dozen?

Fists clenched, I take a deep breath and try to keep my vision from going red.

“Okay. Thank you for letting me know. Is she still in the building, or...?”

The small group seems caught off guard at my continued questioning. I can see their curiosity and confusion.

“Um, no. She was here before we arrived, sir. She left about an hour ago with her things.”

With a tight nod, I turn and head stiffly back toward the elevator—before I make an even bigger ass of myself.

I head straight to the HR office, specifically to Monique, who sighs when I enter.

“I thought you might come knocking, I just didn’t think it’d be so soon.” Luckily, she looks less suspicious than Autumn’s team.

“I just heard we lost one of our senior associates.” Trying to keep it casual, I crack my neck to ease some of the tension burrowed there.

“We did. It was rather...abrupt. Autumn Cavendish just put in her immediate resignation.”

“I see. Did she happen to provide a letter of resignation?”

Monique does a quick double take. It’s odd that I’m asking, odd that I care. In most cases, I’d cut my losses and forget about whichever associate didn’t take the job seriously enough to stick it out. Especially when they were so openly pursuing partner.

“Hmm. She did. Let me pull it up.”

It takes a few moments, but eventually, her printer hums to life. She hands me a single sheet of paper with Autumn’s recognizable signature at the bottom.

My eyes scan the short paragraph quickly.

Due to unforeseen circumstances regarding my health...

Effective immediately...

Thank you for the opportunity.

It’s short, to the point, and detached. I can’t sense any part of the vivacious woman I knew in this letter.

What did I expect, though? A breakup explanation?



SOMEHOW, completely on autopilot, I make an excuse and get back to my office. Cool waves of disbelief wash over me again and again.

I can't believe she'd just disappear like this. When I came home to an empty house, I figured she probably needed a night or two away, some time to decompress. We've been so close. Closer than anyone else I have in my life.

Had, the little voice corrects, forcing the fact that she's gone.

In a burst of desperation, I decide to drive to her apartment.

That would make you no better than her lunatic ex.

Brought back to reality, I focus on that particular subject instead.

Kieran Tate.

As much as I want to shut down and forget that Autumn ever existed, it's impossible for me to leave loose ends. Kieran and whatever he has planned for Autumn is a loose end.

If she never wants to see me again, so be it.

But I'll keep her safe, even from afar—no matter what it takes.



A WEEK GOES BY, colorless, soundless. It's like I'm living underwater. I spend my days eating the bare minimum of food needed to keep me going and burying myself in work. At night, I get home and immediately down a glass or two of whiskey. I'm usually out cold within a couple of hours.

First thing Monday, I wake to the shrill sound of my cell phone, the name *Rick Guerra* taking over the screen. He's a private investigator I hired hours after Autumn pulled her disappearing act.

He's been following Kieran.

He's the last piece I need to put this whole thing away, behind me.

I pick up, not bothering to say anything, squinting in the dawn light.

“Sharpe. Got something interesting for you—late last night I caught him down at a pawn shop. The Silver Lion. He pawned a necklace. Guess who it belonged to?”

Brows furrow. A headache insistently pushes away any lucid thought.
“Who?”

“Ivy O’Connor.”

I sit up, diagonal on the bed, suddenly fully awake.

“You’re sure?”

“I am. It’s in the photos you gave me—the ones her family provided, not the ones from the crime scene.”

“So you’re saying he took it.”

“Yes. If he’s the one who killed the girl, he took it as a trophy, I’m guessing. A lot of killers will do that.”

“You’re sure it was him, Rick?”

“Positive. Got pictures, too, and I checked with the pawn shop—they have fourteen cameras in the main room, all save and backup. Should be good for the next three months if you can get a detective down there.”

“Perfect. Any chance you can bring the photos by today? To my house, not the office.”

“Course. Text me the address and tell me when.”

Hanging up, I feel more clearheaded than I have in a long time. This is the nail in the coffin—this is what I need to prove Kieran Tate is the one who killed Ivy O’Connor twelve years ago. Not Stephen Cooper.

Everything after this moment is instinct. I reach out to Jacobson and set up a meeting—if my call with the DA goes well, then he should be able to show Alex a photo of Kieran to see if she IDs him in a group.

And if she does...

If she does, Stephen Cooper gets out of jail. Autumn gets her brother back.

I pull up the DA’s name and punch the call button, pacing my bedroom in sweats, barefoot.

She answers on the second ring.

“Christopher. I wasn’t expecting a call from you. Is everything okay?”

“Actually, I have a bit of a curveball for you, Kara. Do you remember a murder suspect I went up against years ago —”

I give her Stephen’s name and the rough date. She sounds surprised at the topic.

“This would’ve been right after you moved to the city, correct? When you were a prosecutor?”

“Right. It was my last case before I switched to defense. And I fucked it up.”

The other end of the line is silent.

But Kara is an old hand; she's been around for years and is good at her job. When she speaks next, her voice is crisp and strong.

"How?"

I tell her everything. Ivy, dead out back of a bar with Stephen's knife in her ribs, throat slit. His association with Kieran. That man's recent reappearance and the threats against Autumn.

Kara knows exactly where I'm going with this.

"So you think he's stalking his ex because she knows something—or he assumes she does. But if that's the case, why now? Why twelve years later?"

"I think it's a classic case of a perpetrator thinking it's safe. Enough time has gone by that he's comfortable now. And he must have been looking for Autumn. I'm sure when he found her, he wasn't thrilled that she's now a lawyer."

Kara hums. "It's a relatively clear path, Chris, but I have to ask. What do you have now that makes you think you have the right guy this time? You realize if Stephen Cooper was wrongly accused, that's going to ruin your reputation."

All the air goes out of me as I sit at the end of my bed.

"I know. I don't care. I'd be fine stepping back from work at this point, Kara. It's starting to feel..."

"Like too much," she answers sadly. There's a camaraderie in her tone. She understands what this life is like, and how hard the burnout can hit.

"If I do step back, I don't want to go out knowing I put an innocent man away. Especially now that I've seen the guilty one—I'd never be able to sleep knowing he's out there. I've had a PI trailing Kieran for about a week now. Last night he pawned a necklace that belonged to the first victim."

"*First* victim? You're telling me there are others?"

"One, I think. I have a hunch that if we can get Kieran's photo in front of her, she'll identify him. She was attacked recently, same MO. Slit throat, knife in the ribs, assault and battery. Only she survived. I'd love to see her take him down in a trial if she IDs him."

Kara's interest is officially piqued.

"Alright. You have a good shot at this. But be ready. The media will have a field day. Reach out to whomever you need to and make sure you're crossing your *t*'s and dotting your *i*'s Christopher. If you're going to give yourself up, you have to do it properly."

"I will. Thanks, Kara."

“And Chris. Whatever you and this woman—Autumn—have going on, you better make sure it’s disclosed before this all hits the fan.”

There’s a sly twist to her voice. I smile sadly, staring down at my feet. “I hear you, loud and clear. I’ll send out a company-wide memo later today and have something ready for the media.”

Kara chuckles, enjoying that she caught me out.

I don’t have the heart to tell her that although there was once something between Autumn and I, I’m afraid it’s irreparably gone now.

There might be no getting her back.

Chapter 33

Autumn

Home on a Thursday night at 5 p.m. It feels wrong, but Frank is obviously thrilled. He's begging for the pretzels I've been living off for the last few days. They're the only thing I can seem to keep down along with, oddly enough, sushi.

With Orla busy working her current job at a theater dressing the entire troupe, it's been lonely the last few days. She gets home past midnight some nights, so I try to distract myself with mindlessly watching the TV.

Nothing really interests me, so I land on the news.

Instinctively, my hand sweeps down to my belly as they wrap up the five-day forecast. I have an appointment in one week for my first ultrasound to see how far along I am, discuss the next steps, and figure out what the hell I'm doing with my life.

Not that the doctor will be able to help me with that, but it's definitely on my to-do list.

I look down at Frank.

"We can't just keep moping around, boy. Gotta get back on our feet."

It's easier said than done. The thought of being a single parent in New York City is daunting. I think back to my own childhood, without a mother, and how much of a struggle it was for my dad to pull himself out of his own depression.

He loved her so much. What's it like to live without love after knowing it so intimately?

Probably a lot like this, the voice in my head taunts sarcastically.

Love.

Do I really love Chris Sharpe?

The man I swore to hate from the day my brother was sentenced?

I crunch on pretzels mindlessly, not wanting to think too hard about it. All my life, I've been treated poorly by men. Of course, the first one I fell for, who insisted I deserved love, would be the one I lost just as quickly.

As if I've summoned him, Chris appears on the TV screen.

I sit up, dropping the bag of pretzels on the floor. Frank practically goes into shock.

"I'm just happy the mistake was corrected. Mr. Cooper will be compensated accordingly and he is being released later this evening."

"Do you really think anything can make up for the twelve years and four months that Stephen Cooper has spent at Fishkill, Mr. Sharpe?"

Other reporters murmur in interest. Chris's face is impassive.

"No, I don't think anything can make up for the wrong that was committed against Stephen Cooper by myself and the firm I was working for at the time, as well as by the city of New York. In fact, I'd like to take this moment to apologize."

Chris looks directly into the camera. It's as if his gaze is cutting into me from in front of the courthouse.

"To Stephen's family, I'm sorry for the lost time. I'm sorry he wasn't there to support you and be supported. I'm sorry you had someone who mattered to you taken away, and that you had to watch him be punished for a crime he didn't commit. I hope you'll find the grace to forgive me."

The last sentence, almost whispered, is like an arrow to the heart. I feel like I'm being pulled to the TV screen. My eyes water as I reach blindly for my cell, wondering if it's true—if Stephen will be released tonight. If I can hug him in public instead of in the prison.

Frank whines and nudges up against me. Petting him distractedly, I try to focus again on the press conference as reporters shout questions.

"Mr. Sharpe! Mr. Sharpe! It's admirable that you're admitting to your mistake. But do you really think it's appropriate to have a lawyer from your own firm going up against the man you say committed this crime twelve years ago, when Mr. Cooper was wrongly accused?"

A small smile plays at the corners of Chris's mouth.

"Actually, I do. I have no doubt that the man accused—Kieran Tate—is guilty. As you'll see, the evidence presented in court will support that he has a history of violence and a penchant for hurting women. In fact—well, I don't want to give too much away, but his crimes didn't stop twelve years ago. And Marty Fields is the perfect lawyer for the job."

He takes a moment to clear his throat, adjust the microphone.

"But just in case there are any more questions concerning whether or not I should be involved, I'll take this moment to announce that I am taking a hiatus from legal work."

Chatter starts among the reporters. Chris continues, speaking loud enough to be heard.

"I'll still be CEO of Sharpe Law, but I will no longer be directly involved in any cases or decisions related to casework. My company was made aware of this decision late yesterday and I intend to uphold this choice for the next six months, minimum, if not longer."

A female reporter just out of frame speaks up.

"Mr. Sharpe, what made you decide to step back from your work? Until today and your admittance to wrongly accusing Stephen Cooper, you've been one of New York City's top defense lawyers."

All of a sudden, Chris looks exhausted. Maybe I'm the only one who can see it. He still has on a perfectly tailored suit, cuff links glinting in the crisp sun, wool coat hanging perfectly from his broad shoulders.

But there's something haunted in his eyes.

"I've recently been forced to reevaluate my life," he answers lightly. "And what's important to me. Right now, that's family."

More shouted questions and chatter take over as the camera pans down. The shot cuts back to the in-studio hosts, who look surprised, impressed, and skeptical.

Turning the volume down, I stare at the screen, willing Chris to appear again. I can't shut down this longing in me.

He *had* to be talking to me. Only me.

Stephen's family—that's me. No one else. It's just the two of us, and Chris knew that.

Stephen is coming home.

He did what he promised—got my brother out of prison—and at the cost of his reputation. It also sounds like Kieran is well on his way to being put

away for that girl's murder, as well as the recently committed crime at The Parlour.

"I have to talk to him."

Frank pants excitedly as I sit up and shuffle around, tossing the bag of pretzels on the table, digging for my phone.

Family—he said family is what matters to him.

I have to tell him about this, about the baby. Because it isn't just mine. It's ours.

And just like Chris insisted so fervently that I deserve to be loved, he deserves to know about his child.

Chapter 34

Chris

The church Nathan and Gen chose is perfect. Small, in the country, about an hour outside of the city. Despite the cold, it's a beautiful evening. The stars glitter in a cloudless sky as music plays somewhere in the adjacent barn, decked out in amber lights and evergreen garlands.

My entire family is inside. Nate, Gen, Eva, Roux, Jenson, Mel, and Miles. They've all gathered, laughing and celebrating the one thing none of us expected to find. Love.

So why am I standing out here, chilled to the bone and feeling utterly alone?

I'm just outside of the spill of light, feet on the asphalt drive, a cigarette dangling between two fingers. As I stare off into the night, a dark shadow approaches from the direction of the barn.

"I thought you gave that up, young man."

My eyes cut to the familiar silhouette of Grant. He meanders easily toward me. Retirement looks good on him. I wonder if, in a few months, I'll look as relaxed. But I doubt it.

"I did. Just a habit I'm hanging on to."

It's true; I haven't brought the cigarette to my lips, but the scent of the smoke is calming. Our mother used to smoke, especially after Dad left, and I picked up the bad habit in high school. Quit in college when I realized it

would ruin my image.

“Where is your friend?” Grant asks, leaning against a young tree.

My eyes narrow. “Hmm. What friend?”

“The woman who had you so enraptured. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, Chris. I saw it—there was something special between you two. I thought she was going to be your date to your brother’s wedding?”

There’s a teasing twinkle in Grant’s eye, and for a moment, I want to extinguish it by telling him what happened. That I ruined everything. That I went after Autumn like a lawyer would, like a dog with a bone, gunning for the truth. So much so that she pulled away and disappeared.

Instead, I look down, drop the burning ember to the asphalt, and stomp it out.

“It didn’t work out. I told you, it was just a tryst. Something to occupy my time.”

Though I can’t see his face in the shadows, I can feel that Grant is frowning as he watches me. “Really? Strange it would end just before you have so much *more* time.”

I don’t answer, and we stand in comfortable silence for a few minutes, listening to the rise and lull of laughter coming from inside. A slow song comes on, one I don’t recognize. Grant pushes away from the tree and tips his head toward the barn.

“You’ll be wanted back soon.”

I nod and decide to follow him, despite feeling anything but festive right now. Actually, most of what I feel is guilt. Part of why I’ve been hiding away in the shadows is that I don’t want to ruin my brother and Gen’s happy day.

Inside is full of warmth and a small crowd of those who know Nate and Gen best. I recognize most of the faces and smile politely, trying to slip through the crowd and back toward my table. Most people are up and dancing. Gen’s brother sways gently with Roux beside the dance floor.

The music changes and all of a sudden, I’m hit by a little comet of energy dressed in lavender tulle. Eva looks up at me with her big eyes.

“Can you dance with me, Uncle Chris? Please?”

“How can I say no?”

I don’t really want to be dragged into the group as “Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I’m Yours)” starts to play, but the smile on Eva’s face is enough to warm my hibernating heart. She takes my hand, and as I keep an easy, laid-back rhythm, twirls and bounces enthusiastically.

Nathan and Gen, wrapped around one another, give me warm smiles. Somewhere, someone snaps a photo. Eventually, a small smile starts to tip my lips upward.

And then I see her.

Autumn steps hesitantly into the room, lost quickly among the shifting crowd, but my eyes are glued to her as if we're connected by a thread. A gorgeous terra-cotta wrap dress hugs her curves as she scans the barn.

Eva stops and sidles up close to me.

“Uncle Chris, that’s your friend!”

Autumn’s head turns, hair grazing her jaw, and our eyes meet.

One heavy thud wakes my heart.

Her cheeks go pink with self-consciousness as she realizes I’m mired in the middle of the dance floor, Eva practically glued to my arm. I raise my free hand. Then, Jenson and Mel appear from somewhere to the right.

They’re moving toward Autumn with curious but welcoming looks on their faces. She catches sight of them and the blush deepens. I can see them talking but can’t hear anything, can’t read their lips to save my life.

“Eva, come dance with your dad and me.”

Gen dips in effortlessly and gives me an encouraging smile, stealing her new stepdaughter before disappearing again. Nudged by fate, I make my way across the floor, no idea what to say. Where to start.

When I finally reach her, she’s somehow even more stunning. I have eyes only for Autumn—Jenson and Mel catch on quickly and excuse themselves, Miles complaining sleepily on Mel’s shoulder.

“Hi.”

It’s all I can manage. A small, nervous smile graces Autumn’s lips.

“Hi.”

“I didn’t think you’d come.” Clearing my throat, I add, “I didn’t think you wanted to see me.”

She bites her lip, eyes darting nervously to see if we’re being watched. Luckily, the crowd is still too immersed in music, food, drink, and the newlyweds.

“I did. Want to see you, I mean.” She steps closer, her warm scent enveloping me, and it takes everything I have not to sweep her into my arms and go somewhere private. Beg her not to leave.

“I missed you.”

Her breath tickles my neck. I give in and circle her waist with one arm.

It's enough for now. Her curves press against my side, hands on my chest as she steadies herself in her heels.

"I missed you, too," I murmur back. "And Frank. Did he happen to come with you?"

She laughs, but there's still a frisson of nerves behind it. I pull back enough to see her face clearly.

"Chris...I have to tell you something."

Chapter 35

Autumn

His dark eyes pour into mine, like he's trying to absorb me. I want him to; I want to be his.

But I need him to understand how serious this is. So I reach up with one hand, cup his jaw, get his attention.

He nods, and for just a heartbeat, his eyes drop to my lips. I steel myself before saying, "I'm pregnant."

His body goes still, but he doesn't move away or look angry. I realize I've leaned back just slightly, anticipating a bad reaction. Chris blinks once and his grip tightens on my waist.

"You're pregnant?"

Looking up at him through my lashes, I can't gauge what his reaction is. Or will be. It's as if the entire room full of people around us has melted away, and it's just the two of us staring into each other's eyes.

Then he leans down and kisses me.

I almost stumble back, but Chris catches me with his other hand and pulls my hips tight against him. His arms wrap more fully around me and he lifts me into a spin.

A yelp and laugh escape my lips. "Chris!"

When he puts me down and pulls back, there's a grin on his face.

"You're pregnant!?"

Now, the excitement is unmistakable. I flush with pleasure, slipping my hands beneath his jacket, wanting to be as close to him as possible. Alone with him. I nod and Chris kisses me again.

“This is wonderful,” he breathes when we part. He reaches down and splays a hand across my belly. Realizing where we are again, I glance around, nervous that others might see—but he has his back to the room and no one notices this intimate moment.

“You’re—this is okay?”

“Are you kidding?” His eyes, usually dark, tempting pools, are bright. “Autumn, this is amazing. This is all I’ve ever wanted.”

The confession spills out of him, but Chris doesn’t seem embarrassed or ashamed. He only grins wider, focused entirely on me and the baby. I lift up on my toes to press a chaste kiss to his lips.

“Come with me,” he murmurs, ghosting his mouth against my earlobe as we sway to the unheard music.

“Where?” We’re at a barn in the middle of nowhere. I’m not even sure how we got here, but I gave the driver the address on the invitation that Chris had handed over a week and a half ago.

“I rented a place nearby. A cabin. Come be with me there.”

His hands squeeze the thick curve of my waist and my body thrums with need. I nod and Chris takes my hand, pulling me toward the door without a backward glance.



THE CABIN IS small and already lit when we arrive. It’s perfectly curated—all clean pine and beautiful, lush throws over handmade furniture.

Chris locks the door behind us and pulls me toward him, wasting no time.

My body is already hot for him, like an engine running too long without being opened up on the road. His hands explore my curves and dig into the velvet before discovering the little tie at the side of the wrap. Expertly, his fingers undo the knot and the dress falls away.

A smirk curls his lips.

“Mmm. I should’ve guessed. You’re a minx, Autumn Cooper.”

Somehow, the sexiest thing he’s said all night is my given name. He cups each breast in his large palms, rubbing against the silver lace until my nipples

peak. In seconds, I'm squirming to get closer to his body, stepping out of my heels and onto the thick rug.

"Bedroom?" It comes out in a gasp.

Chris chuckles darkly, his face buried in my breasts, hands kneading my thighs just under my ass. In one fell swoop he lifts me, walking blindly through the small cabin in the wake of my squeal.

The bedroom, luckily, isn't far away. And the bed frame looks very, very solid. Chris places me on the mattress and as he pulls away, I start to turn over ideas of just what we're going to put it through tonight, if I have my way.

Ever efficient, he starts shucking off his jacket and undoing his tie. On a whim, I decide to tease him a little and pull my legs up onto the bed, spread-eagle, the little silver triangle of silk and lace barely covering my already damp pussy.

Chris curses and slows, fingers dragging over the buttons of his shirt as he watches me touch myself. His cock twitches beneath the fabric of his perfectly tailored pants.

I bite my lip and let out a little whine.

"Fuck," Chris groans, managing to get his shirt off before stepping toward me and dropping to his knees. "You're going to be the death of me, Autumn." He grips each thigh in hand and spreads my legs farther, burying his face in my pussy and breathing in deep. "But if this is how I go, I have no complaints."

I smile down at him as he peers up at me from between my legs with a dark smirk. His hands drag up to tangle in the straps of my panties before shimmying them down.

Christopher Sharpe, billionaire lawyer and CEO of Sharpe Law, licks his lips.

"I'm going to make sure you get what you deserve tonight, Autumn. And I want to hear you scream when you do."

Epilogue

Chris

Six months later

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Jenson muses, watching as Autumn carries a box into the little brick building. The windows are covered in cardboard from the inside, but not for long. Nate and Eva pull a section off, revealing the sparsely furnished room.

“You couldn’t stop her if you tried,” Stephen comments as he pauses next to my brother and me. He gives me an appraising glance, something that’s been happening a lot since Autumn and I went public with not only our relationship, but the pregnancy.

While Stephen may not be my biggest supporter, he seems to approve of what we’ve got going on at the moment.

Jenson huffs out a laugh and returns to the small moving van to grab another box. All that’s left now is the furniture. Nothing fancy, since Autumn insisted on purchasing it all herself. I watch, beaming with pride as she comes out of the front door with her hands on her lower back and her belly pushed out.

“Lunch time yet?” I ask, hoping to tempt her away from work. She gives me a sly smile and walks over. It’s more of a waddle, but I’d never say that to her. Pregnancy has made Autumn quick to cry, which all of us—except for

Gen and Melanie—find baffling. And the last thing I want to do is upset the mother of my child.

“I’m starving,” Eva quips, popping out onto the sidewalk. Roux toddles after her before being swept up by Gen.

“I think lunch is a good idea,” Gen says seriously, sharing a look with me. She’s as watchful of Autumn as I am these days. I couldn’t be happier with how my brothers and their wives accepted Autumn into the family. Everything feels...*right*. Like this is what I’ve been waiting for.

“Alright,” Autumn gives in, pouting a bit. “Are we going to the diner? We can meet you there if that’s okay, I just want to get a few more things inside and lock up.”

Nate, Gen, Mel, Stephen, and Jenson gather the kids and pile into Jenson’s car. The diner is only a ten-minute drive away, but I quickly text Nate. **Might be late; don’t wait for us ;)**

I can imagine him groaning in exasperation. *Hey, brother, you had your turn; now it’s my turn to be happy.*

Practically dancing my way into the building, I shut the door behind us and take a look around. It’s nothing too big or fancy. Autumn waved off any seed money and did the legwork herself to get this place up and running.

Cooper & Associates. A little law firm representing the wrongly accused, employing ex-cons. Her plan is to take on cases that other lawyers won’t touch on top of advocating for the innocent.

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asks, turning around to face me with a cute little frown. I can tell she’s self-conscious about the dress she’s wearing. It rides higher up than usual with the baby belly, but shows off her amazing, curvy legs.

“Yes. Trust me, they don’t expect me to be there.”

“I don’t see how that works. You are the CEO, after all.”

“True. But I’m no longer partner.”

Today is the day Marty is being made partner, along with Daniel, another senior associate. I’m confident the two of them will run Sharpe Law perfectly well while I take some time off. Not too long from now, I’ll be a full-time stay-at-home dad, a title that makes me grin every time I think of it.

Autumn harrumphs, but I can see she’s secretly pleased I’ll be spending the day with her and the family instead. Plus, I still have one more trick up my sleeve...

“I’m not too worried. I talked to Grant last night—he’s sending in some

extra help.”

Autumn lifts a brow in curiosity, leaning back against a solid oak desk that she bought secondhand from a local shop. “Oh?”

“His niece, Becca, is moving to the city next week. She’s one of the top lawyers out west—we actually went to the same school. Trust me, if anyone can keep Marty in line, it’s her.”

Autumn grins at the thought, resting a hand on her belly. Once more, I settle into the feeling of everything being *right*. It’s like both of my brothers described, this crazy love—like fate. Like fortune.

This is the perfect time.

I turn and pick my way around some boxes and a filing cabinet, pulling out a carefully packed narrow box that Autumn, luckily, overlooked.

“What’s that?” She tips her head, suspicious at the grin on my face.

“Oh, you know. Just something to celebrate your first day in the office.”

I slide a bottle of Perrier-Jouet Champagne out and watch the smile light up her face. She laughs, head tipped back, her hair falling down to her shoulder blades.

“Chris, what am I supposed to do with that? I can’t drink!”

“Mmm, I know. I’m being a little selfish. This isn’t really for you.”

Moving in close, I tug lightly at the low-cut V of her neckline, licking my lips and pretending to thumb the top off.

“I was planning on dousing you in champagne and...”

She cuts me off with another laugh, pulling me close to keep her balance as we both stumble awkwardly in the pile of office supplies and furniture.

With my arm around her lower back, I tug her into a secure position against my chest and widen my stance. The move jostles us just enough for a ring box to fall out of my trouser pockets.

We both freeze.

“Shit. It was meant to be smoother than that —”

Before the flush of embarrassment settles on my cheeks, Autumn wraps her arms around me and lays a lush kiss on my lips.

“Yes!”

The word is lost in the kiss, and I laugh and pull back, for some reason surprised. Surprised that this incredible woman could love me as much as I love her, surprised she’s chosen to be with me, to carry my child.

“Yes? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure! Yes, yes, yes!”

We lose ourselves in another kiss, swaying giddily, the champagne forgotten on the desk. Autumn hums happily against my lips.

When the fizzy high finally starts to wind down, I smile down at her, feeling the flutter of the baby between us.

“Well then, Autumn Cooper, if you’re so sure...we probably shouldn’t keep our family waiting.”

Her face glows with happiness, and for the first time in my life, I feel complete.

Like I’ve finally achieved my impossible dream.

THE END

Did you like *Broken Boss*? Then you’ll LOVE [*Boss’s Fake Fiancée: An Enemies to Lovers Romance*](#).

* * *

**The big bad boss wants me to play fake fiancée for the weekend.
We played this game once when we were kids.
Then I broke his heart.
Now he's here to huff and puff and blow my little house down.**

Today is the first day at my new job!
New outfit. New hair. New me.

Everything was excellent,
Until I took a wrong turn into the men’s locker room...

Shock doesn’t begin to describe seeing my ex half naked with nothing but a towel around his fit as hell v-line.

Some called our young love, puppy love.
I called it, down right insanity.

The way I wanted him would turn a housewife into a nun.
But then I pushed him away, afraid to get hurt.

Most stories say the guy is the problem.

But in this tale, I'm the problem.

So when he had the audacity to ask me to play fake fiancée for the weekend I was dumbstruck.

I almost said no.

**I most definitely...
should have said NO.**

* * *

[Start reading Boss's Fake Fiancée NOW!](#)

Boss's Fake Fiancée Sneak Peek

Melanie

“Jenson?”

There's a mostly naked man in front of me, but instead of taking in every cut of those perfect abs or curve of his pecs, I'm staring at the little tattoo on his hip.

What the hell?

The towel drying his hair—not the one around his waist, unfortunately—comes down and I'm standing face-to-face with my former high school boyfriend.

His gray-blue eyes are emotionless as they take me in. Shouldn't he be at least slightly curious about what I'm doing in the men's locker room of Dupont Analytics?

What company devotes an entire floor to an employee gym? How was I supposed to know I'd get lost in it while trying to find my new office?

“Melanie.”

Jenson Sharpe says my name easily, as if it hasn't been over a decade since we've seen one another. He's definitely changed from the eighteen-year-old I used to get wrapped up in. His once too sharp jaw is now just right, square and proportionate. There's that same bow to his lip and he's still just over six feet tall. When we were younger, he was gangly.

Not anymore.

He's definitely grown into...everything.

"If you're done staring," he says flatly, tossing the towel in his hand away. The other is still wrapped precariously around his hips, just under that elegant tattoo he got on his eighteenth birthday. A week before I dumped him.

My eyes linger on the shell, beautifully shaded and realistic, but broken into the Fibonacci sequence. The tattoo of a true math nerd.

I rip my gaze away. "Sorry."

"What are you doing here, Melanie?" Jenson's tone is still cool and calm. Despite my heart thundering and my brain telling me to run, I look at him and feel...safe.

The same way I felt all those years ago.

Before I can explain, two men breeze by. They look very awake for 6:30 a.m. and wear amused and curious expressions.

"Mr. Sharpe."

"Dean. You'll have those financial reports on my desk by eight?"

A submissive nod. I look at Jenson with narrowed eyes as the pair exit the gym. *Financial reports.*

There's only one reason I'd run into Jenson Sharpe in a place like Dupont Analytics; one reason why he'd be getting financial reports from men who clearly defer to him.

"What do you do here?"

His eyes run down my body and it sends heat through me, as if he's caressed me with his hands. Memories of nights spent in his beat-up Honda flash through my mind. His fingers playing my body sinfully, teasing and taunting.

"I'm the CEO. I should be asking what *you're* doing here."

The towel around his waist loosens just slightly. Mortified—and tempted—my eyes snap back to his face. "It's my first day of work."

"And you just happened to wander into the men's locker room. Before business hours."

My face heats. It looks bad, but is that a glimmer I see in his eye? A hint of humor? Does he still remember the fussy girl I used to be, uptight about not only arriving somewhere on time, but needing to be early?

"I...wanted to get settled in before everyone else got here."

"Stay right here."

I blink in surprise. It comes out as a command, one he obviously expects

me to obey. This definitely isn't the Jenson I knew, and neither do I recall the cold, unaffected attitude he wears like a mask.

"Excuse me?"

Arms crossed, I can't help popping out a hip. Jenson Sharpe may be half-naked, damp, and delicious, but that doesn't give him the right to be rude. Even if he is the CEO of the company I just started working for.

His eyes cut into me.

"I said, stay here. I'm going to change."

The thought of that towel coming off momentarily takes my breath away. I watch him walk into the other room where the changing area is, the muscles of his back trailing down to two dimples just above his ass.

"I must be in some kind of alternate reality," I whisper to myself, feeling crazy. "I'm still at home, dreaming."

But no. A few minutes later, Jenson walks back into the room.

He's wearing a suit that fits him perfectly, one that compliments his eyes and accentuates his broad shoulders.

"Come."

The word sends a thrum of...*something* through me. I try to ignore it, following him blindly. I don't even know if this is the same way I came in, but we end up in a hallway. People are starting to arrive, hurrying down the hall here and there.

A few look at Jenson fleetingly before dropping their gazes to the ground. Frowning after them, I try to keep up with his long strides.

"What department did you get hired to, Melanie?"

Melanie. He's using my full name. All of a sudden I'd give anything to hear him say *Mel* the way he used to.

But it's been twelve years, and we're practically strangers now.

"Marketing."

His eyes flicker with curiosity as he glances over his shoulder. Back in high school, I was adamant that I'd go to an art school and become a great photographer or painter. He must be wondering what I'm doing in a massive corporation that is slowly taking over the healthcare sector. *I'm a sellout.*

I shake the thought off. It's the money that matters, and Dupont Analytics is paying me a lot to head up their marketing division.

Jenson doesn't speak, not even when we end up alone in an elevator. He hits a number—the fifth floor. There's a directory inside the doors that tells me we're heading for both marketing and strategy.

In the small space, it's agonizingly quiet.

The doors open and Jenson steps out. Even more annoyed now, I follow him...because I don't know what else to do. He *is* bringing me to my office, which is where I was trying to end up in the first place.

A small part of me hopes to get him alone for more than an elevator ride and ask...what? How he's been? What the heck he's doing here? In the deepest part of my soul I know I owe him an apology for disappearing all those years ago, but my stomach twists at the thought of bringing it up.

Jenson turns a corner and someone lets out a startled sound. I peer around his broad back and see a woman with dark pixie cut hair. She's quite short and stares up at Jenson in near horror.

"Mr. Sharpe, I'm so sorry —"

She sees me and all color drains from her face.

"I—Melanie, what are you doing —?"

The woman looks mortified and upset. I look at her company badge: Liza Honenfield. My boss's assistant, who I was supposed to be meeting. Right now.

"Hi, Liza. I'm sorry. I got...caught up."

Staring at your nearly nude CEO. Who is also my ex. No big deal, though.

Suddenly, I can't get away from Jenson fast enough. Liza looks disapproving but starts heading back the way she came. Before I can escape, Jenson's hand wraps around my wrist almost gently, and I feel a jolt of electricity run up my arm.

When I look from his fingers to his face, there's no expression there. He's a blank canvas.

"When you're settled, come find me. I have a proposition for you."

I pull my hand away and ignore the tingling sensation, something I haven't felt with a man...well, since him.

"Okay. Yes. I'll...I'll come find you."

Flashes of memories come back to me as I march toward an open area of cubicles and offices. A teenage Jenson, laughing so hard I can see all of his perfect teeth, the feeling of his mouth curving into a smile against my skin.

The last one sends a shiver up my spine that I hope Liza doesn't notice.

"What were you doing with *Jenson Sharpe*?" she hisses, blocking me into a corner near the water cooler.

"He was just helping me out after I got lost. I took a wrong turn —"

“You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t go straight to HR and tell them to let you go.”

I scoff. “He can’t do that.”

Liza’s eyes are wide with warning.

“Yes, he can. Jenson Sharpe is practically God here. Whatever he says, goes.”

My heart drops into my stomach like a stone as Liza dives into a tour of my new work space and team.

A part of me wants to run far, far away from Jenson.

But I need this job. I took it for a reason.

I’ll just have to ignore the guilt gnawing at me and do whatever I can to remain employed. Hopefully, Jenson has moved past me disappearing from his life and realized that we were just kids with crushes. Fooling around in the back of cars, going to the movies as an excuse to touch in the dark.

Was that all it was? The omniscient voice in my head asks saucily. I ignore it and decide to focus on one problem at a time.

And right now, that’s getting to know every detail about my job as the head of marketing.

Even if it means having to face my past. Every. Single. Day.

[Start reading Boss’s Fake Fiancée NOW!](#)