

~~not the~~
Boss
of **Me**



USA Today Bestselling Author
MAUREEN SMITH

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MAUREEN SMITH



BOSS OF ME

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Soundtrack

“All To You” — Russ (feat. Kiana Ledé)

“Wildest Dreams” — Taylor Swift

“Ocean Eyes” — Billie Eilish

“Replay” — Zendaya

“You Don’t Own Me” — Lesley Gore

“Free Fallin’” — Tom Petty

“Moonlight Sonata” — Beethoven

“Yours” — Greyson Chance

“Yeah, I Said It” — Rihanna

“Espresso” — Sabrina Carpenter

“HERicane” — Lucky Daye

“The Feels” — Labrinth (feat. Zendaya)

Chapter One



MARLOWE

“YOU’RE GOING ON A *WHAT?*”

I wince at my sister’s incredulous tone as I slide my feet into strappy tan heels. “I’m going on a date. With Dawson.”

“The guy your boss introduced you to? The one who rushed off the phone and went radio silent for a week?”

“He’s been super busy at work,” I explain. “But he texted this morning to ask me out for drinks.”

“You can’t be serious,” Ember sputters in disbelief.

“What do you mean?”

“We already talked about this, Marlowe. He’s the son of your boss’s best friend. Going on a date with him is just asking for trouble. So many things could go wrong, and you can’t afford to lose your job because you were naïve enough to mix business with pleasure. Besides,” Ember rants, “there are so many other ways to meet guys. Haven’t you ever heard of Tinder, Plenty of Fish, Bumble—”

“You know I don’t like dating apps,” I interrupt.

“You’ve never even tried one.”

“Don’t have to. I’ve heard horror stories.”

My sister snorts. “You know what’s horrifying? Going out with a guy you’ve never even seen before. I mean, don’t you

think it's weird that he's seen *your* picture but you've never seen his?"

I frown. "He's not on social media—"

"Couldn't he at least send you a selfie? My God, Marlowe. What if he's hideous?"

"He's not," I insist as my rescue cat winds herself around my legs, purring like a turbocharged engine. "Barbara told me he's tall with dark hair and a great smile. She said he's really attractive."

"Of course she'd say that. He's her best friend's son. And *her* definition of attractiveness might be totally different from yours."

The same thought has occurred to me, but I'm not about to admit it to Ember. Reaching down to stroke Sansa's soft orange fur, I say almost defensively, "We talked on the phone—"

"For all of three minutes."

"Long enough to confirm that he's a nice guy—"

"Who might be butt-ass ugly."

I heave a sigh. "Will you stop being so negative?"

"I'm not being negative. I'm being realistic."

My phone alerts me that my Uber has arrived. "Gotta run," I announce as Sansa scampers off.

Ember sighs. "So you're really going through with this insanity."

"I am." I bite my lip. "Wish me luck."

"You're gonna need it," she retorts.

"C'mon, Ember," I groan, crossing to the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the closet door. "I'm new in town and it's my first date in forever. I need all the moral support I can get."

"I know, I know." Her voice softens. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be such a Debbie Downer. I just worry about you."

I smile quietly. “What else is new?”

Ember, who’s three years older than me, has always been overprotective. We lost our father when we were young. After his sudden death, our mom pretty much checked out of parenting. Consumed with grief and anger, she threw herself into work with a vengeance, leaving my sister and me to fend for ourselves. Ember assumed the role of caregiver—helping me with homework, signing my permission slips, giving me boy advice when we got older. It may sound like a sappy cliché, but I don’t know what I’d do without her. She’s my rock.

Even when she’s nagging the shit out of me.

She sighs again. “If the guy’s an asshole, just shoot me a text and I’ll bail you out with a fake emergency.”

I laugh. I wouldn’t actually take her up on her offer, but it never hurts to have an escape plan.

“Be safe,” she warns in her bossy lawyer voice. “And text me when you get there so I’ll have a physical description of the guy in case you go missing.”

“Really, Em?”

“Yes, really.”

I roll my eyes. “As you’ve repeatedly pointed out, he’s the son of my boss’s best friend. If anything happened to me tonight, he’d be the prime suspect. Would he really risk going to prison just to kidnap me?”

“I sure hope not. But there are a lot of sickos out there. So make sure you call me the second you get home, no matter how late it is.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say with a mock salute she can’t see. “Can I go now?”

“I suppose. But if I don’t hear from you—”

I hang up on her in laughing exasperation, then take one last look at my reflection in the mirror.

Dawson and I are meeting for drinks at some hipster bar called The Jaded Zombie. I'm wearing a white linen sundress with spaghetti straps, a fitted waist and a flared skirt. As a data specialist, I usually keep my hair in a messy topknot or ponytail. But tonight I'm leaving it down. It's long and shiny, the color of melted dark chocolate. Definitely one of my best assets.

After spritzing a little perfume on my neck and wrists, I grab my purse and hurry downstairs to meet my driver.

I fidget nervously on the way to the bar. My sister's right. I must be crazy for agreeing to go out with some man I've never laid eyes on before. It's one of the most impulsive things I've ever done in my life. That's not to say that I never take risks.

After graduating college this past spring, I took a huge leap of faith and moved halfway across the country to Austin, Texas—the live music capital of the world. I'd fallen in love with the city while attending the South by Southwest festival during my junior year. I didn't know anyone here or have any job prospects when I decided to relocate. All I knew was that Austin was where I wanted to be.

My mother and sister thought I was out of my mind, and some days I had to agree with them. But three weeks after arriving in town, my gamble paid off when I landed an entry-level job with a festival technology startup.

Austin is an amazing city, and I enjoy the work I do. But I've been here for two months, and other than a few outings with coworkers, I haven't developed much of a social life. Frankly, it's starting to bug me. Which is why I let my boss pass along my number to Dawson.

But now I'm having second thoughts. What if Dawson and I have absolutely nothing in common? What if our date is a complete disaster? What if he badmouths me to Barbara and I get fired?

As my driver approaches Sixth Street, I'm seriously tempted to tell him to keep going. I don't, of course. But I'm tempted.

Since the bustling downtown street is closed to traffic, he drops me off a few blocks from my destination. The July evening is warm and muggy, so I'm a little sweaty by the time I reach the trendy bar.

It's Friday night and there's a good crowd. The music is loud and the atmosphere is lively. I hover at the entrance, scanning the bar. Dawson told me he'd arrive early and snag a table in the back corner so we'd have some privacy.

I look toward the rear of the room. And that's when I see him.

He's sitting alone at a table texting on his phone.

The sight of him shoots through me like a flaming arrow, setting every one of my senses on fire.

He's not just attractive.

He's fucking gorgeous.

Thick straight hair the color of black licorice falls across his forehead as he bends over his phone. He has slashing black eyebrows and cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. The shadow of a beard accentuates the hard angle of his jaw.

He looks like a fallen angel, too beautiful for any earthly realm.

As I send up a prayer of thanks to the patron saint of matchmaking, Dawson suddenly lifts his head and sees me standing across the bar.

He goes completely still, staring at me with an arrested look that sends my heartbeat into maximum overdrive.

I stand rooted to the spot, staring back at him until the door opens behind me, the arrival of more bar hoppers snapping me out of my daze.

I swallow thickly and will my feet to move forward, weaving my way between the densely packed tables as Dawson watches me. My stomach is flipping over and over, turning somersaults like the ones Ember and I used to do on our front lawn as little girls.

As I draw closer to Dawson, I'm ensnared by the blueness of his eyes. They're so dark they're almost navy. They remind me of the color of the sky at twilight. Stunning. Potent. Seductive.

He stands as I approach, his dark gaze sliding over my body like a burning caress. It leaves me hot and quivery, nipples hard as diamonds.

"Hi." My voice is barely a breath. "I'm Marlowe. You must be Dawson."

The corner of his mouth quirks up ever so slightly. He's much taller than I expected, with long legs and thick thighs wrapped in tailored dark slacks. Beneath his dark blazer, his shoulders are breathtakingly broad and his chest hard with muscle. His white button-down shirt highlights the healthy glow of his tanned complexion. The first three buttons are undone, exposing his strong throat and a triangle of smooth skin.

He's hotter than I could have ever hoped for. Hotter than I could have imagined in my wildest fantasies. On top of that, he smells absolutely amazing.

He moves to pull out my chair, but I'm so nervous that I sit down before he reaches me.

Those deep blue eyes glitter in the low light before he returns to his seat across the table.

Up close, I notice a faint dimple in his chin beneath his five o'clock shadow. He has the sexiest mouth I've ever seen, a firm upper lip with a full lower one that has a slight dip in the middle. I want to slide my tongue over it, suck the cushiony plumpness into my mouth and hear him groan with pleasure.

I realize that he's watching me and feel my cheeks warm. Clearing my throat, I nervously tuck my hair behind my ear and offer what I hope is an alluring smile. "Please tell me you haven't been waiting long."

"I haven't." His voice is a dark rumble, liquid sex poured over hot gravel. It sends a lick of heat twisting through my

stomach.

I don't remember him sounding so orgasm-inducing on the phone. Seriously. I could come just from the sound of his voice.

“What're you drinking?” he asks.

I usually order a margarita or a vodka cranberry, but I'm feeling adventurous tonight. “I'll have a whiskey, neat.”

Dawson lifts one eyebrow, the corners of his mouth twitching toward a smile. I can't tell if he's surprised or impressed by my selection.

As he signals the waiter, I sit back in my seat and cross my legs, holding his gaze across the small table. “So ... come here often?”

His lazy white grin sucker punches me between my thighs. “C'mon, beautiful,” he drawls. “You can do better than that.”

I laugh as my heart does a funny skipping dance. Jesus. You would think he's the first man who's ever called me beautiful.

When the waiter appears, Dawson orders us both a neat whiskey. I find myself watching him, drinking in his darkly handsome features. The heavy eyebrows, the square jaw, the mesmerizing blue eyes framed by a thick fringe of lashes as black as his hair.

He exudes raw sex appeal, a savage magnetism that oozes from his every pore. It's nearly overpowering.

I don't realize the waiter has left until Dawson speaks to me, interrupting my fascinated perusal of him.

“Um, sorry.” I blink like I'm coming out of a trance. “What did you say?”

There it is again, that slight twist of amusement that curls his mouth. His sexier-than-sin, please-suck-my-clit-till-I-scream mouth.

“I asked how you like living in Texas,” he says. “Hot enough for you?”

I laugh. “Well, I’ve only been here a couple months, but the weather definitely takes some getting used to.”

His eyes gleam. “Too hot for you?”

“A little,” I admit.

When he smiles, my breath snags in my throat. God, he’s gorgeous. How can he possibly be single?

“*You’re* obviously used to the heat,” I blurt out.

He quirks an amused eyebrow.

“Because you grew up in Texas,” I clarify.

“I did. Been here all my life.”

Before I can respond, the waiter returns with our drinks. We pick up our glasses and gently clink them together.

“Cheers,” he murmurs.

“Cheers.” I smile and sip my drink, feeling the whiskey burn a path down my throat to my hypersensitive clit.

Dawson watches me over the rim of his glass. The heat in his eyes is more intoxicating than all the liquor served at every bar on this street.

“So you’re a whiskey girl, huh?” he drawls.

“Just depends on my mood.”

“Hmm. And what kind of mood are you in?”

I smile slowly. “A daring mood.”

His eyes lock with mine. The sexual tension sizzling between us is so hot it’s almost suffocating.

Three pulse-pounding beats pass before Dawson takes another sip of his drink.

I can’t help staring at the large, tanned hand wrapped around his glass. His fingers are long and broad with clean, blunt nails. They look strong enough to crush his glass with no effort.

They match the rest of him, I note, staring at the muscled bulk of his shoulders. He’s not as huge as some overinflated

bodybuilder, but he's definitely big enough to be intimidating. He looks rugged yet refined. Tough yet urbane.

Judging by the expensive cut of his blazer and the platinum watch circling his wrist, he's obviously loaded. He seems out of place at this trendy hipster bar. He'd probably be more at home at some high-end restaurant with dark wood paneling, crisp white tablecloths and no prices on the menu. The kind of place that would bankrupt me just walking past it.

I watch as he lowers his glass from his mouth. His glistening lips make me want to rip my panties off and sit on his face.

"Do you do this often?" he asks.

I blush. "Do what?"

He leans slightly forward. "Go on blind dates."

"No. Not really. Actually," I confess, staring into his eyes, "you're my first."

"Am I?"

"You are."

The wicked gleam in his eyes sends an illicit shiver down my spine. There's something seriously dangerous about him. Something that excites me, pulls at me, unravels my inhibitions like thread off a spool.

His lashes lower as his gaze drops to my mouth and lingers. "I wonder what other firsts I can talk you into," he says in that obscenely sexy voice.

I lick my lips, pulse rioting. "I guess that's for me to know ... and you to find out."

Chapter Two



GUNNER

I AM ONE DASTARDLY SON OF a bitch.

What else do you call a guy who lets a woman think he's someone else?

I've been deceiving Marlowe for the past ten minutes, and there's absolutely no excuse for that.

But in my defense, I didn't ask for any of this. I was sitting here minding my own business when one of the hottest babes I've ever seen walks right up to me, introduces herself and parks her sweet ass at my table.

What was I supposed to do? Tell her she's got the wrong guy? Tell her to get lost?

Out of the fucking question.

Her last words hang between us, both a challenge and an invitation. *I guess that's for me to know ... and you to find out.*

Holy hell.

"So, Dawson," she says casually, "how do you like working in finance?"

I don't know how much she already knows about her blind date. I'm afraid to say the wrong thing and blow my cover. The less I reveal about myself, the better.

"It's cool," I answer with a smooth shrug. "Nothing exciting."

She nods, running a manicured finger around the rim of her glass. Glossy dark hair frames a perfectly oval face with bright hazel eyes, a slim upturned nose and plump pink lips that have me thinking the filthiest thoughts.

Those lips are moving again, forming another question. “How long have you worked at Deloitte?”

“Long enough,” I say with a wink.

Her thick-lashed eyes twinkle at me.

“What?” I murmur.

“Nothing. It’s just ... you’re not what I was expecting.”

I give her a lazy smile. “What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know.”

“Liar.”

Her throaty laugh sends heat curling through my veins.

“Okay, okay,” she relents. “Maybe I was expecting someone a little ...”

“Boring? Pasty? Pencil-necked?”

She laughs again, her eyes sparkling. “Fishing for compliments?”

“Maybe.” *Fuck, she’s beautiful.* “Do I exceed your expectations, Marlowe?”

“I think that’s a safe assumption.” The way she stares at my mouth makes my dick hard. *Harder*, I amend. Damn thing’s been practically saluting her ever since we locked eyes across the bar.

I watch as she picks up her glass and takes a sip of whiskey. I’ve never been more turned on by the sight of a woman swallowing.

“So what about you?” I ask, forcibly steering my mind back on track. “Do you enjoy your work?”

“Very much. I mean, it’s not something I’d want to do forever,” she admits. “But for my first job out of college, I really can’t complain.”

“What do you do?” *Shit! Should I already know that?*

Her smile puts me at ease. “I’m a data specialist. Basically, I maintain a database of festivals happening around the world.”

“Ah. Interesting.” I stare at her long dark hair and wonder what it would feel like trailing down my bare chest or spilling against my thighs. I imagine sliding my fingers through the luscious strands, cupping her face between my hands and staring into those beautiful hazel eyes while I fuck her against a wall.

As I reach for my glass, I spot my twin brother across the bar. We’re supposed to be meeting for drinks to unwind after a long week. The Jaded Zombie isn’t my usual scene, but it was Maverick’s turn to pick the spot and this is what he chose. Since I had an appointment nearby, I was able to arrive early and grab us a table in the back, where we’d be less likely to be recognized.

Maverick sees me and heads in my direction.

I jerk my head *no*.

He stops short and frowns, then cocks an eyebrow at my lovely companion.

“Are you okay?”

I meet Marlowe’s questioning gaze and flash a smile. “I’m fine.”

She glances over her shoulder just as my brother turns and makes his way to the bar to order a drink. Though we’re fraternal twins, we share enough of a resemblance to be easily identified as brothers.

Trying to distract Marlowe, I blurt out, “So where’d you go to college?”

She turns back to me, her hair sliding over her shoulder like silk. “I graduated from Pitt.”

“University of Pittsburgh,” I translate, nodding. “What was your major?”

“Music.” She sips her drink. “I start my master’s program in the fall.”

Beauty and brains? Be still my heart. “What’re you studying?”

“Information Studies, with a focus on academic librarianship.”

I lift an eyebrow. “You want to become a librarian?”

“A music librarian,” she specifies. “I’m interested in working for an academic library or an orchestral ensemble.”

I tilt my head to one side, smiling at her. “Music undergrad. Music librarian. I’m sensing a theme here.”

“That I love music?”

“That would be it.”

She laughs. “You got me. I *do* love music.” Her expression softens. “My father was a band teacher and composer. He always had a melody in his head, a song at his fingertips. He taught me everything I know about music.”

The sadness in her eyes reaches deep inside me, touching a part of me I thought long dead and buried.

“He sounds like a very special man,” I say quietly.

“He was.” Her throat moves in a tight swallow. “He died when I was twelve.”

“I’m sorry.”

She nods, acknowledging my sympathy.

I take a sip of whiskey, watching her over the rim of my glass. “So what exactly does a music librarian do?”

“It would depend on where I worked,” she explains. “If I worked at a library, for example, I’d be responsible for cataloging music collections, answering reference questions, selecting materials for acquisition—that sort of thing. As an ensemble librarian, I could do cool stuff like maintaining orchestra scores for the musicians and marking individual parts to keep track of who plays which part for concerts.”

“Sounds cool,” I agree, loving the way her face lights up as she talks.

“I used to organize my dad’s massive record collection,” she says. “He appreciated my meticulous system, and I enjoyed making it easy for him to find artists he wanted to listen to.”

I smile softly. “Sounds like you were born to be a music librarian.”

She laughs. “Something like that.”

Entranced, I gaze into her sparkling eyes. I could listen to her talk all day. When was the last time I felt that way about a woman?

“Where are you going to grad school?” I ask her.

“University of Texas.”

“My alma mater. Awesome.” The second the words leave my mouth, I know I’ve screwed up.

“Really?” Marlowe tilts her head to the side and regards me quizzically. “I could have sworn Barbara told me you went to Texas A&M.”

Shit, shit, shit!

“Are you sure that’s what she said?” I counter, trying to plant a seed of doubt in her mind. “People who aren’t from Texas, such as yourself, often get the two schools mixed up.”

She laughs sheepishly. “I’ve definitely done that a few times.”

I smile, relaxing a little because I’m off the hook. *Close call.* “Make no mistake, UT is in a class by itself.”

“I know,” she says with a twinkling smile. “It’s one of the top universities in the country. I can’t wait to start classes next month. Since you’re an alumnus, maybe you could recommend—” She’s interrupted by a loud musical ringtone coming from the purse hanging over the back of her chair.

Throwing me an apologetic smile, she grabs her handbag and rummages around for her phone. I wonder if her real date

is calling to say he's running late. I wonder if I'm about to be busted. I fucking hope not.

I find myself holding my breath as she checks her phone screen. The thought of relinquishing her to some finance prick bothers me more than it should.

She's not yours to relinquish, my conscience reminds me. What you're doing is crazy and totally out of character. You have to know it won't end well.

Marlowe lifts her head to look at me. "Would you excuse me for a minute?"

"Sure." My voice is deceptively smooth. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just need to, um, return this call." She rises from her chair and flashes me a quick smile. "I'll be right back."

I watch her walk away, the dark curtain of her hair swaying with her stride. She has a great ass, high and round and spankable. And her legs are nice and long—long enough to wrap around my back while I thrust deep inside her.

As she passes the bar, my brother looks her up and down appreciatively, setting my teeth on edge. He leans all the way to the side to watch her strut down the hall to the restrooms. When she's out of sight, he swivels around on his stool and mouths to me, *Who's the hottie?*

None of your business, I mouth back.

He laughs and shakes his head.

Part of me feels guilty for keeping up the charade with Marlowe. I know it's completely wrong, but I can't seem to help myself. She's the most captivating woman I've ever met and I want to get to know her better—even if that means lying to her a little longer.

I bring my glass to my mouth, watching as a curvy blonde sidles up to Maverick. When she leans close and purrs something in his ear, he promptly forgets about me.

As I drain my whiskey, laughter erupts from a table to my left. I absently glance over to see a group of women sharing a

toast, clinking their glasses loudly. They're in their early twenties and dressed in skimpy tops, short skirts and high heels.

Three of them catch my eye and smile invitingly. When I tip my head, they giggle and start whispering to the others, who turn to stare at me, batting their eyelashes and tossing their hair like some mating call.

On any other night, I would have ordered them a round of drinks and indulged in some harmless flirting. But there's only one woman I'm interested in tonight, and she's not sitting at that table.

Tracing the rim of my glass with my thumb, I casually glance in the direction of the bathrooms. It feels like Marlowe has been gone forever, though in reality it's only been a few minutes. She's probably on the phone with the real Dawson, telling him about the creepy psycho impersonating him. At this very moment she could be sneaking out the back entrance, getting as far away from me as possible.

And I wouldn't blame her. Not one damn bit. I don't deserve to spend another nanosecond in her presence.

But when she suddenly emerges from the back, I'm more relieved than a shipwreck survivor spotting a rescue boat.

I watch her come toward me, trying like hell to read her expression. She doesn't look pissed, which is a promising sign.

Just as I rise to my feet, she suddenly stops and pulls her phone out of her purse. She frowns at the screen.

Oh shit. Oh fuck.

She looks across the bar and meets my eyes. My mouth runs dry, and I realize I'm not breathing.

She holds up a finger as if to say *I'll be right back*. Then she brings the phone to her ear and turns to head back down the hall at the same moment I hear a voice exclaim, "No fucking way. That *can't* be Pantheon's CEO."

A pang of dread punches me in the gut before I turn to see a dudebro in a backward baseball cap ambling toward me.

I smother a groan. Great. Just what I need.

He reaches my table, grinning like a maniac. “Holy shit, I *thought* that was you!” He extends his hand. “Topher. I’m a huge fan, Mr. Ransom.”

“Nice to meet you.” I shake his hand, hoping to get rid of him before Marlowe returns. *If* she returns.

He grins. “I couldn’t believe it when I saw you sitting here. What’re you doing slumming in this dump? You’re, like, a trillionaire.”

“Not quite.” I force a smile edged with impatience. “Listen, Christopher—”

“Topher. Just Topher.” He wrinkles his nose. “I hate Christopher. What a douche name.”

“That’s my grandfather’s name.”

His face goes red. “Oh, crap. I-I didn’t mean to—”

“Just kidding. Look, I’m kind of in the middle of something important here—”

“Oh, my bad. Didn’t mean to interrupt. I was just heading out to meet some friends at another bar when I saw you. Had to come over and shake your hand.”

“No problem,” I say, keeping an eye out for Marlowe.

Topher grabs a cocktail napkin from the table. “Can I get your autograph?”

“Sure.” I pat my breast pocket. “Damn. Got a pen?”

“Ah, shit. I don’t.” He looks around. “Maybe someone—”

I don’t have time for this. “How about a selfie? That’s better than an autograph scrawled on a bar napkin, right?”

“Yeah, definitely.” He whips out his phone, grinning as he says, “My boys wouldn’t believe I met you unless they saw proof.”

I clap him on the shoulder. “Exactly.”

Barely a second after we snap the selfie, I spot Marlowe coming down the hall. A jolt of panic shoots through me.

“I’d love to come work at Pantheon when I graduate college next year,” Topher says with a hopeful grin. “Do you think—”

“Call my office on Monday. Tell my assistant we met and you’re interested in an internship. We’ll set up an interview.”

His eyes widen comically. “Holy shit. For real?”

“For real.” *Now scam before you blow my cover!*

“Thank you so much,” he enthuses, pumping my hand. “It was so awesome to meet you!”

“Likewise.”

Topher walks away happy as a clam, passing Marlowe on her way back to the table.

She glances over her shoulder at him before giving me a half curious, half teasing smile. “Fan of yours?”

“Son of an old family friend.” It’s scary how easily the lie rolls off my tongue. Scary and appalling.

Marlowe seems to buy it, which makes me feel even guiltier.

I motion to the phone in her hand. “All good? No emergencies calling you away?”

She smiles. “None whatsoever.”

A wave of relief washes over me. I’m such a fucking reprobate.

She glances around the noisy bar, her teeth sinking into her plush lower lip. I can’t help wondering how those lips would feel beneath mine, how they would stretch around my cock as she takes me to the back of her throat.

I swallow thickly, lust and guilt waging an epic battle. I should come clean with her. It’s the right thing to do, even if it results in her storming out on me and vanishing from my life, a decidedly unnerving prospect that makes my chest ache.

“Marlowe—”

She meets my gaze boldly. “Would you like to go someplace quieter?”

“Hell, yes,” I growl, my desire for her overriding any guilt I feel.

When she smiles at me, my heart pounds and my cock swells with anticipation. I quickly pull out my wallet, peel off a few hundreds and drop them on the table, then place a hand on Marlowe’s back to steer her toward the exit.

I need to get her out of here before her real date shows up.

Because if anyone’s taking her home tonight, it’s going to be me.

Chapter Three



MARLOWE

YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE.

My sister's whimsical words echo through my mind as Dawson guides me out into the sultry summer night. I'd slipped away to the bathroom to return Ember's call and assure her that I was safe. She was relieved to hear that not only was Dawson *not* hideous, he was the hottest man I'd ever met in my life.

She'd asked a million questions, even calling back a second time when she remembered something else. Once she was satisfied that I was in good hands, she told me to let my hair down and have an amazing time.

I intend to do just that.

Dawson and I stroll along Sixth Street as music from bars spills out onto the sidewalks. The popular downtown district is packed with tourists and college students enjoying the last weeks of summer break.

Dawson keeps his hand on my lower back, guiding me around questionable-looking spills on the ground. He's so tall and masculine, exuding absolute power and dominance. With every step, he gives off a "don't fuck with me" vibe that warns the drunk frat boys to give us a wide berth.

When we stop at an intersection, he leans down, his soft lips grazing my temple as he murmurs, "Did you have any particular destination in mind?"

I turn my head to meet his gaze, my pulse racing with excitement. “No,” I say breathlessly, “but I’m open to suggestions.”

His slow, sexy smile makes my stomach muscles curl in delight.

“I know the perfect spot.” He takes out his phone and types a text, his thumbs flying over the keypad. His hands look so big and strong. I can’t help imagining how they would feel on my body, stroking my skin.

He glances up from his phone, his eyes locking with mine. We’re suddenly oblivious to the bustling nightlife around us, the sounds of blaring music and drunken laughter. The whole world fades away, leaving just the two of us facing each other. I’m drawn to him in a way I’ve never been drawn to any man. It’s intoxicating and thrilling and scary, unharnessed electricity buzzing beneath my skin.

He brushes a strand of hair away from my face, staring into my eyes. “How old are you?”

I hesitate before answering, “Twenty-three.”

He nods, the movement barely perceptible. Barbara already told me he’s twenty-seven, so I don’t bother asking his age.

We walk down to North Lamar Boulevard where a glossy black executive car awaits us.

Dawson opens the back door for me. I pause only a moment before climbing inside.

He slides in after me, his warm thigh pressing against mine. The contact makes me tingle all over, from my scalp to my toes.

When our eyes meet in the darkness of the backseat, my heart races like a Ferrari on the Autobahn.

I can’t believe I’m doing this.

I don’t leave bars with complete strangers.

I don’t hop into cars headed to unknown destinations.

I don't do crazy, reckless things.

Or at least I didn't ... until tonight.

A few blocks later, we pull up to the private entrance of a swanky club thrumming with music. The driver gets out and opens the back door.

Dawson climbs out first, then reaches down to help me from the car. His hand is slightly callused and huge, swallowing mine completely.

I smile up at him. He smiles back, his thumb stroking the inside of my palm and sending gossamer sensations fluttering through me.

The club's private entrance is guarded by a security team dressed in black. The men stand up straighter and nod deferentially to Dawson as he guides me inside the dark, pulsing venue.

"I know the owner," he tells me.

I grin. "Nice."

The security manager escorts us upstairs to a plush lounge with sleek black leather couches and a curved bar. It's conveniently empty.

With his hand on my lower back, Dawson steers me to the couch furthest from the door.

I sit down and cross my legs.

He sits beside me and leans back, draping one arm along the couch behind me. I feel breathless, mesmerized by the pure sexual power radiating off him.

The lights are dim and there's music playing softly in the background—something slow and seductive by The Weeknd.

"Would you like a drink?" Dawson offers.

"No, thank you." I pull my gaze from his to glance around the suite. "Your friend has a really nice club."

"I'll tell him you said so," Dawson murmurs. "Do you like dancing?"

“Sometimes.” I meet his eyes. “Just depends on my mood.”

We stare at each other, the air sparking and crackling between us. We didn't come here for small talk. We came here to make out, and there's no use pretending otherwise.

He seems to be waiting for me to make the first move. As if he wants to ensure my consent.

Without a moment's hesitation, I slide my hand behind his neck and run my fingers through the soft, thick hair skimming his collar.

His eyes darken, focusing on me with an intensity that makes my heart pound. I return his gaze as he strokes my cheek with gentle fingertips and rubs the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip. I'm pretty certain he can feel the shiver that runs through my body at his touch.

When I uncross my legs, his eyes follow the movement. I bite my tingling lip, barely breathing as he lowers his big hand to my knee. A thrilling rush of heat sizzles in my blood.

As his thumb traces lazy circles on my knee, my breathing quickens until I'm almost panting. Lips parted, pulse racing, I watch his hand glide slowly up my leg and slip under my dress to caress my inner thigh.

I suck in a sharp breath and press my knees together, trapping his hand against my sensitive skin.

He stares at me, his eyes so dark they look almost black in the dim lighting.

“Come here,” he whispers.

I don't resist when he pulls me onto his lap to straddle him, my dress riding up my legs. His chest and thighs feel as amazing as they look, rock solid and packed with muscle. The prominent bulge between his legs feels harder than tungsten steel, making my mouth water and heating my core.

His gaze roams over my face, drinking in my features. “God, you're beautiful.”

My stomach flutters with a thousand butterflies. “So are you.”

His eyes spark like blue fire before he brushes my hair off my shoulder and presses the hottest, sexiest kiss to the hollow of my throat.

I quiver with pleasure, my head falling back. He takes advantage, licking and sucking the skin of my neck until I’m moaning and trembling.

“God, Marlowe.” His hands frame my head, guiding my face down to his. The moment our lips meet, my heart rate explodes and electricity sizzles through my body.

He kisses me slowly at first, probing my mouth with the sensuous swirl of his tongue. His lips are the perfect combination of soft and firm, his beard stubble deliciously chafing my skin. He smells so good and tastes incredible, smoky whiskey and intoxicating man.

I moan into his open mouth, my eyes drifting closed. His fingers slide into my hair, cradling the back of my head and holding me to him as his mouth consumes mine, hot and deliciously bruising.

It’s like no other kiss I’ve ever had. I drown in it, matching his raw hunger until I’m gripping his shoulders and grinding against his massive erection. I need him inside me so badly my whole body aches.

“Dawson,” I whimper. “I want you.”

His chest vibrates with a ragged groan before he breaks the kiss and buries his face in my neck, panting harshly. “There’s something I need to—”

“Don’t stop,” I moan with shocking desperation. “Oh God, please don’t stop.”

He curses roughly and crushes our mouths together, his hands cupping and squeezing my ass. His cock is so hot and hard, straining against me through the expensive weave of his slacks. I can feel my juices leaking from my pussy, drenching my bikini panties.

I've never been so turned on in my life. Blind with need, I press closer to him, my hips rocking into his mouthwatering hardness.

He groans low in his throat, deepening our kiss with long, luscious strokes of his tongue. My nipples are throbbing painfully and the hot, aching place between my legs screams for relief. I'm seriously on the verge of begging a complete stranger to fuck me.

Finally, *finally*, his hand slides between my thighs, pushing my soaked panties to one side. A shiver of anticipation sweeps through me. Then he's touching me right where I need him, circling my swollen clit with his thumb and making me writhe in his lap.

His eyes never leaving my face, he eases one long finger inside me. I gasp as pleasure jolts through my belly and ripples down my spine.

He curls up his finger and thrusts it slowly in and out. Each time he withdraws, he rubs his thumb over my clit before entering me again.

I moan helplessly, my hips twisting against his hand. When he adds a second finger, I arch back in shocked ecstasy. Holy shit, he's found my G-spot. No guy has ever found my G-spot before. Ever.

"Oh God," I whimper, my eyes rolling back in bliss as he thrusts his fingers in and out of me, hitting that magic spot every time. It feels so incredible. *Too* incredible.

I climax with surprising speed, crying out as my body bucks and spasms with the strength of my release.

Dawson groans sexily as my juices spill over his fingers. He continues pumping into me and stroking my clit, wringing every last bit of shuddering pleasure from my body.

Spent and trembling, I collapse against him, closing my eyes as the aftershocks of my orgasm pulse through me. Dawson brushes his lips across my temple and slowly pulls his fingers out.

Floating in a blissful haze, I distantly register a muffled ringtone. It's my phone.

"Ignore it," Dawson growls in my ear.

"I'd better get it, though it's probably just my sister again." Pushing my hair out of my face, I reach across the couch to grab my purse. I fumble my phone out and look at the screen, frowning when I see Dawson's number. "That's weird."

Dawson has gone completely silent.

I stare at my phone, then at the man whose talented fingers just gave me the best orgasm of my life. The guilty look on his face sends a cold shock through me.

"Oh, my God," I whisper.

"Marlowe—"

I scramble off his lap and frantically scoot away from him, my mind reeling with fear and confusion.

His expression softens at my panicked reaction. "Hey," he says gently, as if talking to a frightened animal. "It's okay, sweetheart. I'm not going to hurt—"

"Who are you?" I choke out, staring at him in horror.

He stares back at me, regret stamped across his gorgeous face. "My name is Gunner."

Sheer mortification washes over me, scalding my cheeks. I yank my dress down, sling my purse strap over my shoulder and shoot to my feet so suddenly that I wobble on my heels.

When Gunner rises to steady me, I swat his hand away and bolt for the door.

"Shit. Wait." He comes after me. "I'm sorry for lying to you—"

"Get away from me!" I scream.

"I never do things like this, but you're so fucking beautiful. So sweet and incredible. You hit me like lightning the moment I saw you, and I just—"

“Leave me alone!” I run out of the room and race down the hall. My heart is pounding chaotically, and for a moment I can’t breathe through the shock of what just happened.

Hearing the creep’s footsteps behind me, I hurry down the stairs and race past two bouncers. Their faces are a blur, their voices startled.

“Miss, are you—”

I keep going, running toward the rear exit as I hear Gunner tersely instruct someone to bring the car around.

Bursting from the club, I pull out my phone to call an Uber. As I storm toward the curb, Gunner catches my upper arm and turns me around.

“Marlowe—”

“Fuck you!” I shout, trembling with humiliation and fury. “How could you do that to me? Do you know how scared I was when I realized you weren’t my real date? I thought you might be a rapist or a serial killer! I thought I was about to die!”

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.” His voice is ragged with contrition. “I don’t know what the hell came over me.”

“What kind of psycho *are* you?” I shriek.

He winces, rubbing the back of his neck. “In my defense, I did try to stop—”

I slap his face hard enough to snap his head sideways.

In the ensuing silence, my blood roars in my ears and my heart hammers violently against my ribs.

“I suppose I deserved that,” he murmurs.

“Damn right you did!” I jab a finger in his face. “You’re a creepy psycho. A sick fuck.”

A muscle in his jaw flexes. “I didn’t mean to—”

“The car is ready for your guest, sir,” an attendant interrupts.

Gunner nods curtly.

“Oh, my God.” I stare at him in disbelief. “You don’t just know the club’s owner. You *are* the owner!”

His expression is caught somewhere between sheepish and irritated. “Marlowe—”

“Stay the hell away from me!” Too incensed to wait for an Uber, I march to the curb, climb into the waiting car and ride off without looking back.

I’M STILL FUMING WHEN I GET home.

I don’t bother to wash off my makeup or brush my teeth. I kick off my heels, change into an oversized Pittsburgh Steelers T-shirt and crawl under my covers.

When Sansa leaps onto the bed to sniff my face, I glare at her and grumble, “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

She eyes me for a long moment, then flicks her tail and meows as if to say *Better luck next time*.

I snort at that. I’m done with blind dates. After tonight’s disaster, I’d have to be crazy to risk such humiliation again.

Scowling, I watch Sansa hop down from the bed and wander off in pursuit of better entertainment. I know my sister will worry if I don’t check in before morning, so I reluctantly fish my phone out of my purse and shoot her a text: **Date turned out to be a dud. Not even worth discussing. I’m going to bed. We can chat tomorrow.**

A minute passes before Ember responds: **A dud? That sucks! Was he full of himself? The hot ones usually are.**

He was definitely full of *something*, I think darkly before texting back: **He was an asshole. Gave me a creepy stalker vibe.**

Oh hell no!

Exactly, I reply.

I’m so sorry, Mar, Ember commiserates. **Bad dates are depressing. But it sounds like you dodged a bullet.**

Definitely, I agree. But beneath my fury and embarrassment, I can't help feeling an almost crushing disappointment.

I've never met anyone like Gunner before. It wasn't just the explosive chemistry we shared, the way he made my whole body ignite like fireworks. It was also the way he looked at me, the way he smiled and laughed. The way he listened to me and said my name like a caress. He was the first man with whom I'd ever felt such a deep connection.

And it was all a big damn lie.

Ember sends another text: **Just found out I have to go overseas. My boss and I are meeting with a big client at the London office. We'll be gone for a week, but I'll try to touch base when I can.**

Ok, I reply, wishing I could go with her if only to escape my mortifying life for a while. **Have a safe trip and take lots of pics.**

I'll try, she promises.

I sign off with a blowing-kiss emoji and she responds in kind.

After tossing my phone on the nightstand, I flop onto my back and glare at the ceiling. I find myself replaying everything that happened tonight, remembering each scintillating detail.

I can still smell him on me, which doesn't bother me nearly as much as it should. Worse, there's an intense throbbing between my legs, a pulsing beat I can't ignore.

I squeeze my thighs together, but the ache only deepens. Heaving a frustrated breath, I grab the pillow out from under my head and press it over my hot face.

Damn that lying, filthy-sexy bastard!

It takes me forever to fall asleep, and when I finally do, a pair of hypnotic blue eyes chases me into my dreams.

Chapter Four



MARLOWE

FRIDAY NIGHT'S FIASCO PUTS ME IN a bad mood for the rest of the weekend.

I hate that I can't stop thinking about Mr. Tall, Dark and Creepy. I hate that I can't stop reliving the way he felt inside me, the way he made me beg and moan and come all over his fingers. It was the hottest sexual encounter I've ever had in my life. Which makes his deception all the more infuriating.

I'm still seething by the time Monday rolls around. On top of everything else, I dread seeing my boss. By now she would've heard about my disastrous non-date with Dawson. I'm sure she thinks I'm a total flake, and she probably regrets playing matchmaker for me. I just hope it won't affect our working relationship.

I drag myself out of bed to shower and wash my hair. After a quick blow-dry and makeup job, I slip into a white button-down shirt and slim gray slacks. The office dress code is super casual, so most of my coworkers wear jeans and flip-flops. Not me. I grew up watching my mother march off to work every morning in a power suit and heels, her designer briefcase swinging at her side.

You have to dress for success, she would tell my sister and me. If you want to be taken seriously as a professional, you have to look the part.

We both internalized the message. But Ember went a step further and became an attorney, following in our mother's footsteps. That's why she's the apple of her eye and I'm not.

Grabbing my purse and a yogurt from the fridge, I head out to catch my bus. My old car gave up the ghost the week I moved here, so I've had to rely on public transportation. Thanks to heavy traffic compounded by two accidents, I end up being thirty minutes late.

As I hurry into my work area, there's an undercurrent of tension in the air. People are huddled around their cubicles, whispering among themselves and glancing furtively around.

Reaching my cubicle, I drop my handbag on the desk and poke my head over the cubicle wall to speak to Quinn, my coworker and bestie who's tapping away at her keyboard. She has long lavender hair and sparkling brown eyes outlined in black.

"Hey." I don't know why I'm whispering. Maybe because everyone else is whispering.

Quinn looks up at me. "Hey." She sounds nervous. "You're here."

"Yeah. Traffic was really bad. What's going on?"

She glances around before saying in a hushed voice, "Apparently management had an emergency meeting late Friday night."

"About what?"

"No clue. But, um, Barbara was looking for you."

Shit! Of all days to be late! "I left her a voicemail—"

"I don't think she cared about you being late," Quinn interrupts. "She just told me to send you back when you get here."

The fine hairs on my arms prickle with unease. *Am I in trouble? Is she going to yell at me for standing Dawson up?*

Quinn gives me a look I can only describe as sympathetic. "Good luck."

I can feel everyone staring at me as I walk through the maze of cubicles, heading in the direction of the supervisors' offices. I feel like a condemned prisoner marching to the scaffold.

It seems an eternity before I reach my boss's office. The brass nameplate beside her door reads BARBARA YOON, CNP, PH.D, DIRECTOR OF EVENTS. Through the glass panels, I can see her sitting behind her desk with her phone to her ear.

I knock hesitantly on the closed door.

She looks up and waves me inside.

I step into the office and close the door behind me, then cross the room to sit in the chair facing Barbara's desk.

She ends her call and sets the phone down. She looks stressed out, strands of black hair coming out of her usually neat ponytail.

I lick my dry lips. "Sorry for being late—"

"Don't worry about it." Her smile is strained. "How was your weekend?"

"Um. Not great." I decide to address the elephant in the room. "I don't know if you've already heard, but Dawson and I didn't meet on Friday night. There was a mixup and I, uh, left the bar before he got there."

Barbara nods. "The bartender told Dawson that you left with another man. Is that true?"

"Yes, but it's not what you're thinking," I say in a rush. "I mistook the guy for Dawson, and he didn't correct me."

Barbara raises an eyebrow. "He let you think he was someone else?"

"Yes!" My face burns with renewed anger. "As soon as I realized he wasn't Dawson, I told him off and got away from him. I was too upset to call Dawson back, so I just went home."

I can't tell if Barbara believes me or not. She's looking down, her manicured fingernail tapping a card on her desk. It's

one of her business cards.

I twist my hands together in my lap. “I’d love a do-over with Dawson, but I’ll understand if he’s no longer interested.”

Barbara chuckles grimly. “I’ll let you two work that out. Right now I have bigger fish to fry.”

I eye her nervously. “Is everything okay?”

“Not exactly,” she says, folding her hands on top of her desk. “I’m afraid I have some bad news. You may have heard through the grapevine that we lost crucial funding this past quarter. As a result, we’ve been forced to make drastic budget cuts. Unfortunately, that means reducing staff.”

My heart plummets to my stomach. “Are you firing me?”

“Laying off,” she rephrases.

I stare at her. “Is this because of what happened with Dawson?”

“Of course not!” She looks offended by the suggestion. “This has *nothing* to do with Dawson.”

All I can hear is my sister saying *I told you so*. She was right. Going on a date with the son of my boss’s best friend was a colossally bad idea.

Even though said date never actually happened, I think bitterly.

“You’ve been a wonderful employee, Marlowe,” Barbara assures me. “You’re a self-starter, you work hard and you always have a positive attitude. I wish we didn’t have to let you go. Ultimately, the decision came down to seniority.”

“So I’m a casualty of the last hired, first fired rule.” I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.

Barbara regards me sympathetically. “If our financial situation improves in the future, I wouldn’t hesitate to hire you back.”

I say nothing, trying to tamp down the panic clawing at my stomach. I have bills to pay. Rent, utilities, tuition, not to mention a pesky little need to buy food for sustenance. What

am I going to do without a job? What the *fuck* am I going to do?

“I’m more than happy to give you a good reference,” Barbara tells me. “And I’ll keep an eye out for any openings that might interest you. In the meantime, I have a job lead for you.”

Hope flares in my chest. “Really?”

She picks up her business card and hands it to me. “Look on the back.”

I flip the card over to read the information she’d jotted down.

“A maid?” I try not to sound as deflated as I feel. “You want me to apply for a job as a maid?”

She looks uncomfortable. “I just thought ... well, you’ve done housekeeping before, so you already have experience ...” Her voice trails off.

I swallow hard and force a smile. “Of course.”

“The employer pays very well—above market, actually. He also offers tuition reimbursement.”

That perks me up. “For domestic staff? Really?”

“Really. He’s a very wealthy man who runs a major corporation. He definitely won’t have any trouble filling this vacancy.” Barbara pauses. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of updating and submitting your resume over the weekend. Since I hadn’t told you about the layoff yet, I didn’t want you to be blindsided by another employer calling you. So I provided my phone number instead of yours. Yesterday I heard from the private agency that screens applicants for the employer. She told me that his head housekeeper will be interviewing candidates for one more day. There were limited slots available, so I scheduled an interview for you.”

“I—oh.” I don’t know what to say.

“It’s just temporary, until something better comes along.” Barbara gives me an encouraging smile. “Go to the interview. If you decide you’re not interested, no harm done.”

I stare at the card in my hand, mulling over her words. I put myself through college working as a housekeeper at a luxury hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. It was a nasty, grueling job and I hated every moment of it. Do I really want to go back to scrubbing toilets and changing dirty sheets?

You might not have any other choice.

“When’s the interview?”

“Ten o’clock.”

“This morning?” I squeak.

Barbara cringes apologetically. “I know it’s short notice, but I didn’t want you to miss out on the opportunity. Like I said, this job opening won’t last very long.”

I glance at my watch. I have less than an hour to get to the interview, and I still have to clear out my desk and turn in my ID.

Barbara’s intercom buzzes. “We’re waiting for you in the conference room,” an impatient voice says.

“Be right there.” Barbara mutters something in Korean, then gives me a rueful look. “Guess we’d both better get going.”

I muster a smile. “Thanks for looking out for me. You didn’t have to, but you did and I appreciate it.”

“No thanks necessary. It was the least I could do.” She smiles kindly. “Good luck, Marlowe. Keep in touch.”

I HAVE TO TAKE AN UBER to the interview, so Quinn offers to drop my things off later. She feels awful for me, but I can tell she’s secretly relieved to still have a job. So are several other coworkers who gather around my cubicle to commiserate while I pack.

After saying goodbye to everyone, I head out and climb into my waiting Uber. We’re halfway down the street before I realize I don’t even know the name of my potential new employer. I was so rattled by getting canned that I totally forgot to ask Barbara, and now it’s too late.

I've never felt so unprepared for a job interview.

It's barely ten o'clock and the temperature has already reached a sweltering eighty-five degrees. I'm roasting in the backseat of the Prius. Sweat trickles down my spine, gluing my shirt to my back. The car's air conditioning couldn't have picked a worse day to go on the fritz.

The driver sheepishly apologizes and cranks the windows down, but the stifling breeze doesn't offer much relief.

I uselessly fan myself as I stare out at the passing scenery. The employer lives in a wealthy enclave just west of downtown. Nestled along Lake Austin, the sprawling estate is tucked away behind an imposing iron gate.

After my driver identifies himself to a video camera, the gate swings slowly open. As we head up the mile-long drive, I can't help feeling dazzled by the lakefront property. The grounds are dotted with live oaks that form a canopy over the road, and the perfectly manicured grass is so green it looks fake.

I pull out my compact and almost shriek at my reflection. My cheeks are flushed from the heat, and not in a flattering way. The wind tugged strands of hair from my bun, plastering them to my damp forehead. I look like I just trekked across a desert under a blazing sun.

I hurriedly tuck the loose strands back into my bun, refresh my lip gloss and check my underarms to make sure I don't have sweat stains.

As we near the end of the drive, an enormous mansion comes into view. It's sleek and modern with lots of glass and chrome. Totally stunning.

The driver pulls around the circle and stops in front of the stone staircase leading up to the front door. He starts apologizing again for the AC, but I'm already jumping from the oven of a car and hurrying up the steps to press the doorbell.

An actual butler opens the door and peers down his nose at me. "Miss Somerset?"

“Hello. I’m here for an interview with Mrs. Calder,” I say, referring to the head housekeeper.

The man ushers me inside a gigantic entrance hall with a checkered marble floor and abstract modern art on the walls.

“This way, please.”

I follow the butler, looking around with a mixture of amazement and dread. I don’t mind hard work, but this is *a lot* of square footage to clean.

The butler leads me to a high-ceilinged sitting room with sleek couches and chairs. A huge picture window offers a spectacular view of the lake.

I’m greeted by an elegant fiftysomething woman with blondish gray hair pulled back in a severe bun. She takes in my wilted appearance and purses her lips with displeasure.

“Miss Somerset, I presume?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Feeling intimidated and self-conscious, I move forward to shake the woman’s hand.

Her fingers are cool, her pale gray eyes critically appraising me from head to toe. “You sounded older on the phone.”

“I get that a lot,” I say, assuming she wouldn’t approve of my boss impersonating me.

She studies my face another moment and then motions for me to sit in one of the two armchairs next to the large marble fireplace.

She takes the other chair and opens a folder on her lap to peruse my resume. “I see that you worked at the Fairmont Pittsburgh,” she remarks.

“Yes, ma’am. For almost five years.”

“Are you from Pittsburgh?”

“I am. Born and raised.”

“Hmm, yes. You have an accent.” Her tone makes it clear it wasn’t a compliment. “You graduated with honors from the

University of Pittsburgh. How did you balance the demands of working and going to school full time?”

“I sacrificed a lot of sleep and social activities, and I had to learn how to manage my time. It wasn’t easy, and it took me an extra year to graduate. But I’ve never backed down from a challenge, and nothing was going to stop me from getting my degree.”

Mrs. Calder looks up from my resume to evaluate me through narrowed eyes.

I unconsciously straighten my spine. After years of playing the piano, I have pretty good posture. But compared to this woman’s rigid bearing, I might as well be slouched down and manspreading.

She starts asking me questions about my housekeeping experience at the Fairmont. I answer as honestly as possible without dwelling on the negative aspects of the job. Like having to clean up after rich assholes who trashed their suites and left no tips. Like going home after every shift with aching feet and a sore back. Like getting yelled at and having my pay docked for the smallest infractions. I focus on the positives, sounding as chipper as a cheerleader.

Mrs. Calder listens in silence, never interrupting. Her impassive expression makes it hard to tell what she thinks of my answers, which is super unnerving.

“I understand that you studied music in college,” she says.

“Yes, that’s right.”

She nods. “Mr. Ransom is a patron of the arts with season tickets for the symphony.”

I smile, mentally seizing on the employer’s last name. Ransom. Now I just need a first name so I can google him on my way home.

“I’ve heard nothing but great things about the Austin Symphony Orchestra,” I tell Mrs. Calder. “I hope to attend a concert someday.”

She hums a noncommittal note as she looks back down at my resume. “In addition to your regular duties, you would be expected to perform other tasks as needed.”

“Other tasks?”

“Mr. Ransom does a great deal of entertaining,” she explains. “Charity balls, art showings, dinner parties. You may be called upon to serve guests and assist the catering staff during these events.”

Sounds reasonable. “Okay.”

She closes the folder, sets it aside and primly folds her hands in her lap. “Do you have any questions for me?”

“Um, is the neighborhood accessible by bus?”

“Heavens, no.” She practically shudders at the idea. “A private vehicle would be provided for you to run household errands and shop for groceries.”

“Great,” I say slowly, “but how would I get to work? I don’t own a car, and taking an Uber every day would get pretty expensive.”

Mrs. Calder frowns at me. “Are you not aware that this is a live-in position?”

“*It is?*” I squeak.

“It was clearly stated in the job posting.”

Shit! How did Barbara leave out such an important detail?

“Is this going to be a problem for you?” Mrs. Calder asks imperiously.

“Um, well, I have four months left on my lease.”

“I see.” She purses her lips until they disappear. “Anything else?”

I shift nervously in my chair. “I have a cat.”

She draws back as if I just revealed that I’m a cannibal. “Mr. Ransom doesn’t allow pets. Especially cats.”

What does he have against cats? I want to ask.

“I don’t have to live here to do my job,” I say instead. “I worked at the hotel without—”

“Mr. Ransom is a stickler for punctuality,” she cuts me off. “He doesn’t tolerate tardiness. At the office, if anyone shows up late to his meetings, he makes the offender stand up and apologize to the whole room.”

Holy crap. What a douchecanoe.

“One of our previous housekeepers was consistently late due to car trouble. After she was terminated, Mr. Ransom decided to make this a mandatory live-in position.” Mrs. Calder’s tone is firm. “It’s nonnegotiable, Miss Somerset.”

“I understand.” Living in a lakefront mansion wouldn’t exactly be a hardship, and not having to pay rent would help me save a ton of money. But if I accept this job, I’ll have to find another home for Sansa. The thought depresses me.

“Mr. Ransom is very particular about the people he hires,” Mrs. Calder informs me. “Whether they work in his company or his household, he holds them to the highest standards and compensates them accordingly.” She pauses. “For a few years, we used a cleaning service that we were very pleased with. But after some confidentiality breaches, we were forced to terminate their contract. Since then we’ve had difficulty finding a suitable replacement.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say with appropriate solemnity.

“It’s regrettable. Having to hire and train new housekeepers so frequently can get tiresome.” She pins me with a direct look. “I’ve been interviewing candidates for a week now, and I believe you’re the best fit for us. So I’d like to offer you the job.”

I feel a leap of excitement despite the fact that this interview is raising all kinds of red flags. “How soon would you need me to start?”

“As soon as possible,” Mrs. Calder says crisply. “Mr. Ransom is going away on business this week, and he expects the position to be filled before he returns.”

“Oh.” I chew my lower lip while running through a mental checklist. I’ll have to break my lease. Pack up my apartment. Put my stuff in storage. Find a new home for Sansa.

“Based on your background and qualifications,” Mrs. Calder continues, “your starting salary would be one hundred thousand a year.”

I gape at her in stunned disbelief. I couldn’t have heard right. “Did you say one hundred thousand *dollars*?”

“That’s correct.” There’s a knowing twinkle in her eyes. “Your salary includes a benefits package and a year-end bonus that you’ll find more than generous.”

My head is reeling. I’m speechless. Completely freaking speechless.

“The offer is contingent upon successful completion of reference and background checks, and a drug test. You would also have to sign a nondisclosure agreement, given Mr. Ransom’s high-profile status as CEO of Pantheon Global Solutions. The NDA is very important, for reasons I’ve already discussed. Confidentiality violations won’t be tolerated, nor will any other forms of inappropriate behavior.” Mrs. Calder pauses to examine my face before rising with her hands clasped in front of her. “I’ll give you a day to—”

“No need,” I blurt out. “I’ll take the job.”

Chapter Five



MARLOWE

TEN MINUTES LATER, MRS. CALDER ESCORTS me to the front door.

I'm grinning from ear to ear. I can't help it. In less than two hours, I've gone from being unemployed to landing a six-figure job. I'll be earning more than three times what I made before. That means I can save enough money to buy another car, which I'll need to get back and forth to school. I can even donate more to the local animal shelter.

I can't believe my luck. I'm tempted to pinch myself just to make sure I'm not dreaming. It's entirely possible that I fell asleep in the backseat of that sweltering Prius, and this is all a fevered delusion.

"I would have asked our driver to take you home," Mrs. Calder says, "but he's driving Mr. Ransom to the airport as we speak."

"That's okay," I assure her. "My Uber should be here any minute."

She opens the front door for me. "I'll be in touch soon."

"Great." I beam at her. "Thanks again for the opportunity."

She gives me a faint smile before closing the door.

As I start down the steps, a gleaming black luxury sedan pulls up in front of the house. Before the car comes to a complete stop, the back door opens and a man in an expensive

suit lunges out. He has his phone to his ear and is barking instructions to some poor soul on the other end.

The sight of him makes me freeze in my tracks, recognition slamming into my brain.

It's the lying dirtbag from the bar.

Mr. Tall, Dark and Creepy.

He stops halfway up the steps and stares at me, equally stunned. "*Marlowe?*"

Fury bubbles up inside me, hot as lava. *He's* my new employer?

"Un-fucking-believable," I whisper.

He ends his call without saying goodbye, never taking his eyes off me. "What're you doing here?"

"I came for a job interview," I snap. "Big mistake, obviously."

He moves forward, those long legs closing the distance between us with scary ease. An electric zing pulses through me, my head buzzing from his sudden proximity.

Though I'm standing on the step above him, he towers over me, his big shoulders blocking out the sun. His bespoke navy suit brings out the deep blue of his eyes and hugs his body like he was born in it. I hate myself for noticing these details. Hate myself even more for letting them affect me.

His eyes move over my face, focused and intense. "Did you interview for the housekeeper job?"

"Doesn't matter. There's no way in hell I'd ever work for you." I try to storm past him, but he grabs my wrist.

"Let go of me!" I hiss furiously.

A muscle throbs in his jaw. "I'm sorry about Friday night. I shouldn't have lied to you—"

"No shit!" I wrench free of his grasp, my skin tingling from the warm clasp of his fingers. He smells incredible, which only makes me madder.

He stares down at me, his eyes narrowed in speculation. “I thought you liked your job. Why are you looking for another one?”

“None of your damn business.”

His stare hardens. “You’re on my property. That makes it very much my business.”

It takes everything in me not to ball up my fist and punch him in his gorgeous bastard face. “I heard about a job opportunity that interested me. But I wouldn’t have come to the interview if I knew *you* were the employer. Thanks for showing up just in time to save me from making the second biggest mistake of my life. The first mistake was going anywhere near an asshole like you!”

“Dammit, Marlowe,” he growls in frustration. “I’m not proud of what I did. I was wrong to deceive you, and you have every right to hate me. But we made a connection that night. It was real and we both fucking know it.”

I glare up at him. “As if it weren’t bad enough that you pretended to be my date, you had the audacity to take me to a club that you own. Which means you specifically instructed your employees not to blow your cover. Who *does* that?”

“I’m sor—”

“Go to hell!”

He scowls and rakes his hand through his hair, then gestures impatiently to the Mercedes-Maybach idling at the curb. “I was on my way to the airport. At least let me take you home.”

“Not a chance.” I’m relieved to see my ride pulling into the circle drive. “Please tell Mrs. Calder that I appreciate her offer, but I won’t be taking the job.”

Gunner’s jaw tightens. “Marlowe—”

I shove past him and stomp down the steps to climb into my Uber.

The driver is gaping out the window at Gunner. “Isn’t that the CEO of—”

“Yes.” I snatch my sunglasses out of my purse and jam them onto my face.

“Holy shit,” the driver marvels. “I applied for a job at his company, but I never got called for an interview.”

I snort bitterly. “You dodged a bullet.”

“Really?” Surprised eyes flick to me. “Why do you say that?”

“He’s an asshole. Now can we please go?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” The driver takes one last longing glance at Gunner before pulling away.

I glare out the window at the perfectly tended grounds of the estate. My stomach is churning, fury and regret burning behind my eyes.

I should have known this opportunity—like my date with Gunner—was too fucking good to be true.

Chapter Six



GUNNER

I WATCH THE HONDA DISAPPEAR DOWN the tree-canopied road. As a strange tightness squeezes my chest, I pivot and stride up the steps to the front door. It opens before I reach it.

“Welcome back, sir.” Mr. Leland, my butler, greets me with a politely quizzical look. “Did you forget something?”

“Thought I did, but I was wrong. Where’s Mrs. Calder?”

“In her office, sir.”

I nod and head down the hall to Mrs. Calder’s private study.

She looks up from behind her antique ivory desk, surprise flickering across her face when she sees me. “What are you doing here? You were supposed to go straight from your office to the airport.”

“That was the plan,” I grunt, perching a hip on the corner of her tidy desk.

She checks her watch and frowns. “You’re going to be late for your flight.”

“I own the plane. The flight leaves whenever I get there.”

Her elegant eyebrows soar toward her hairline. She’s probably wondering what’s gotten into me. I’m never late for anything, and I never keep others waiting. That’s my brother’s MO.

“I just ran into the woman you interviewed,” I tell her.

“Ah, yes. Marlowe Somerset. Very impressive young lady. I offered her the job and she accepted.”

Not anymore, I think sardonically.

“I was just about to call the other interviewees to cancel—”

“Let me see her file,” I interrupt.

“Whose? Miss Somerset’s?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Calder frowns at the unusual request. “Is there a problem?”

“I just want to see her qualifications.”

Mrs. Calder stiffens, her lips thinning. “I’m perfectly capable of hiring your household staff.”

“I know you are,” I say with a fond chuckle. “You’ve been with me for years. This place would fall apart without you.”

She looks only mildly pacified.

“You’re just as hard to please as I am. If you hired Miss Somerset on the spot, she must have really knocked your socks off. Naturally, I’m intrigued.” I point to a folder on the desk. “Is that her file?”

“Yes. I need to call her references—”

“I’ll do it.”

Mrs. Calder looks scandalized. “Don’t be ridiculous. You have far more important matters—”

“Good thing I know how to multitask.” I hold out my hand for the folder.

She hesitates, her mouth opening as if ready to argue further before she reconsiders and reluctantly passes me the file. “I’ll order the background check—”

“Please do.” Leaning across the desk, I kiss her forehead and wink at her. “I’ll bring you back a souvenir from Hong

Kong.”

“You have to get there first.” She shoos me away like a stray cat, her East Texas accent creeping into her voice as she clucks, “G’on now.”

I laugh, tucking the folder under my arm and striding out the door. When I get outside, my driver is waiting patiently by the car.

I’ve barely climbed into the backseat before I’m opening the folder and scanning the contents of Marlowe’s resume. I absorb every detail like a starving man, and I’m still not sated.

I want to know everything there is to know about her. The kind of details I won’t find on a one-page resume or job application.

I snap the folder shut and stare out the window, thrumming with impatience and anticipation.

I’ve been thinking about Marlowe nonstop since the night we met. Every facet of her is burned into my memory.

The way she smiled.

The sound of her voice and the music of her laugh.

The scent of her skin and the taste of her mouth. God, did she have a fuckable mouth. Those lips and that tongue were enough to turn a man into a crazed addict.

For as long as I live, I’ll never forget the feel of her tight little pussy melting around my fingers like sun-warmed honey. After she left me standing on the curb, I couldn’t resist bringing my fingers to my mouth to taste her delicious lingering essence.

At thirty years old, I’m not some inexperienced goober trying to get his dick wet for the first time. I’ve been with plenty of women, way too damn many to name. None of them—I repeat, *none* of them—have ever affected me the way Marlowe did.

I thought I’d never see her again. I was unhappily resigned to that very real possibility. And then suddenly there she was, practically delivered to my doorstep like a rare, beautiful gift.

A gift with sharp claws, I muse with a silent chuckle.

She hates my guts and wants nothing to do with me.

I can't blame her. But she's mistaken if she thinks I'm giving up so easily.

As CEO of a Fortune 500 company, I've earned a reputation for being a master negotiator, ruthless when I have to be. I don't like taking no for an answer, and I seldom do.

I want Marlowe in my life, in any capacity I can have her.

One way or another, I always get what I want.

Chapter Seven



MARLOWE

“I CAN’T BELIEVE WE’RE NOT CUBBY neighbors anymore,” Quinn laments that evening when she drops off my things. I wasn’t at the job long enough to accumulate much, so the box is practically empty. Like my checking account.

“Thanks for bringing my stuff.” I set the box down beside the secondhand couch I bought at a thrift shop. “Want a beer?”

“Sure.” Quinn follows me toward the kitchen and sits at the breakfast bar. “It sucks not having you there, Marlowe. It doesn’t feel the same.”

“I know. I’m gonna miss our coffee breaks.” I open the refrigerator and grab two low-carb beers as Sansa comes prowling over to rub against Quinn’s leg.

“Well, hello there, beautiful.” Quinn bends down and strokes Sansa’s head while cooing at her. The calico purrs in satisfaction and swishes her floofy tail.

I sigh forlornly. “She’s going to run off with you when I have to start feeding her generic cat food.”

Quinn laughs as I bring her a beer and take the stool beside her. She hitches her chin at my laptop on the counter.

“How’s the job hunting going so far?”

“Not great,” I admit. “I’ve only seen a few jobs that I qualify for. I registered with an employment agency, but they

warned me that hiring slows down during the summer and it's not the best time to apply for jobs."

"I've heard that before," Quinn says. "Hopefully something will come through. In the meantime, you should file for unemployment."

"I know." With another sigh, I scoop Sansa up and settle her warm bulk in my lap. She purrs contentedly, her emerald eyes closing as I scratch behind her ears.

Quinn regards me sympathetically. "Have you told your sister?"

"No," I mumble. "I'm putting it off as long as possible."

"Why?"

"Because I already know what she's going to say. She's going to tell me it's a sign that I should come back home. And when my mom finds out, it'll just reinforce her opinion that I'm a perennial failure. I mean, *I'm* the daughter who took five years to graduate college. *I'm* the daughter who refused to go to law school to pursue a lucrative career. *I'm* the daughter who picked up and moved halfway across the country without a job. *I'm* the fuckup who's now unemployed, whose only prospect is working as a housekeeper for a rich douchebag."

Quinn's expression softens. "I'm really sorry your mom isn't more supportive."

I shrug off her sympathy. "I'm used to it."

"That doesn't make it right." Quinn puts her hand on my shoulder. "No matter what she thinks, you're *not* a failure. Moving someplace new takes guts and determination. If your mom can't see that, you're better off living far away from her judgy ass."

I give her a grateful smile. "Thanks, babe."

She squeezes my shoulder, then picks up her bottle and takes a swig of beer. "So what's this about you working for a rich douchebag?"

I hesitate, suddenly wishing I hadn't brought it up. "I interviewed for a live-in housekeeper job this morning. The

employer turned out to be Gunner Ransom.”

Quinn almost chokes on her next swallow of beer. “*What?*” she croaks, staring at me. “Did you say *Gunner Ransom?*”

I nod sullenly.

“The CEO of Pantheon?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes.”

“Oh, my God!” she exclaims incredulously. “He offered you a job as his housekeeper?”

“Not him directly,” I grumble, “but yes, I was offered the job.”

Quinn lets out an excited squeal. Startled, Sansa darts off my lap and runs for cover.

“Holy shit, Marlowe! That’s amazing! I mean, it would’ve been even awesomer if you got a job at his company, but *still!*”

I throw her a surly look. “Before you break out the champagne, I turned the job down.”

“*What?*” She stares at me in disbelief. “Why the hell would you do that?”

I scowl. “It’s a long story.”

“Um, hello?” She gestures around, beaded bracelets jangling on her wrists. “I have time!”

“I’d really rather not—”

“C’mon, Marlowe. Spill it.” She leans forward expectantly.

I know she’s not going to let it go, so I tell her what happened on Friday night. She listens without interrupting, her eyes growing bigger and bigger until they’re practically popping out of their sockets.

“Holy hell,” she breathes when I finish. “I can’t believe he did that to you. That was so messed up.”

“Tell me about it.” I take an angry swig of beer.

“No wonder you’re so pissed. What a dickwad.”

“Exactly!”

Quinn bites her lip, picking at the label on her bottle. “That said ...”

My eyes narrow. “What?”

“Well ...” She squirms under my death glare. “Just to be clear, I’m not excusing what he did. He was totally wrong for lying to you. It was dickish and frankly creepy. But ... well, it sounds like you two really hit it off. Maybe you were destined to meet that night. Maybe it was no accident that Dawson was late and you mistook Gunner for him. Maybe it was kismet.”

“Oh, please,” I snort in disgust. “It wasn’t kismet.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.” I toy with my bottle and take another sip while Quinn contemplates me. I can tell she has more to say, and whatever it is, I’m not going to like it.

“Maybe you should reconsider his job offer.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“Um, because he’s a billionaire? And hot as fuck?” Quinn laughs. “Do you know how many people would sell their soul to work for Gunner Ransom?”

I think about my Uber driver, recalling the way he’d stared so longingly at Gunner that I almost felt sorry for him.

“I’ve seen pictures of his estate in *Architectural Digest* and *Texas Monthly*. It looks amazing.”

“It is,” I grudgingly admit.

“Damn. So not only could you have worked for the dude, you could’ve lived in his fabulous mansion?” Quinn sighs and shakes her head at me. “How much was he paying anyway?”

I shift on my stool. “A hundred thousand.”

Quinn’s jaw drops. “*A hundred thousand dollars?* Are you fucking serious?”

“I was just as shocked as you are, believe me.”

“And you turned him down!”

“Can you blame me? He pretended to be my blind date, Quinn. He made out with me, knowing full well I thought he was someone else! There’s no way I could ever work for such a sleazebag. I’d have to be insane to even consider it, and I’m not insane.”

Quinn snorts. “You just turned down a six-figure job. Sounds pretty insane to me.”

I shoot her a glare.

“I’m just saying, Marlowe. Job offers like that don’t come around every day.” She pulls out her phone and starts tapping away. “According to this website, the average salary for a housekeeper in Austin is \$34,567. You’re being offered nearly three times that amount!”

“I’m well aware.”

“Are you? Because I—” Quinn’s lecture is interrupted by the doorbell.

Grateful for the reprieve, I get up and walk over to open the door. There’s a local florist deliveryman holding a huge bouquet of flaming orange roses. My eyes widen in surprise.

“Marlowe Somerset?” At my nod, the deliveryman smiles and hands me the heavy vase of flowers. “Enjoy your evening.”

I thank him and close the door.

“Wow!” Quinn exclaims. “Those are stunning! Who sent them?”

“I have no idea.” I carry the arrangement to the breakfast bar and set it down, then reach for the attached card.

My pulse quickens as I read the note: *I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot. In the spirit of starting over, my name is Gunner. I regret lying to you that night, but I have no regrets about meeting you. P.S. The job offer still stands.*

Everything inside me wants to melt into a puddle of forgiveness, but I staunchly resist. Gunner Ransom took advantage of me that night. He made a fool of me. He can’t

weasel his way into my good graces by sending flowers, no matter how exquisitely beautiful they are.

“Well?” Quinn eyes me excitedly. “Don’t keep me in suspense. Who’s your secret admirer?”

I hesitate. “Him.”

“Him? You mean ...” She stares at my sour expression, her eyes going wide. “No way!”

I hand her the card.

She reads it quickly and proceeds to swoon. “Oh, my God, Marlowe! This is so romantic!”

“Romantic?” I echo scornfully.

“Yes! He sent you flowers! Unbelievably gorgeous flowers that obviously cost some serious moolah. I mean, look at them. I’ve never seen roses that color before.”

Neither have I, but I’d sooner die than admit it.

Quinn holds up the card, her eyes twinkling. “He’s clearly into you, Marlowe.”

I snort. “He’s not into me. The creep just wants to finish what we started that night.”

“I’m sure he does,” Quinn leers, wiggling her pierced eyebrows. “Can you blame him?”

I flip her off.

She laughs and shakes her head at me. “All joking aside, Mar, you need to think about the big picture here. Being Gunner Ransom’s housekeeper could open so many doors for you. If you do a great job, maybe he’ll hire you to work for his company. Or he could use his connections to get you an amazing job with an ensemble or academic library. Hell, as a bigtime alumni donor, he could even pull strings to get you a teaching assistantship at the university since all the positions were filled by the time you applied. Seriously. Just think of all the favors he could do for you.”

“I don’t want any favors from him,” I grumble, glaring at the lavish bouquet of roses. “Besides, he doesn’t allow pets. If

I take the job, I'll have to give up Sansa."

"Hmm. Maybe not."

I frown at Quinn. "What do you mean?"

"What if I take over your lease?"

"Excuse me?"

"You need someone to look after Sansa, and I've been planning to move out of my parents' house and find my own place. Maybe this was the nudge I needed to finally get off my ass and do it."

I drink my beer, mulling over her proposal. I can't deny that it would solve most of my problems. I won't have to worry about paying rent and buying groceries if my employer provides free room and board. And with Quinn living in my apartment, I can visit Sansa whenever I want.

Quinn grins, watching the wheels turn in my head. "It's the perfect plan. You get to work for a hot billionaire, I get my own place and Sansa gets to stay in her familiar environment. Win-win for everyone." She beams at her ingenuity.

I wish I shared her enthusiasm, I really do. But working for Gunner Ransom is a devil's bargain I'm not willing to make.

"Well?" Quinn presses eagerly. "What do you say?"

I roll my lips together. "I'll think about it."

When hell freezes over.

BY THE END OF THE WEEK, a frozen hell is looking more and more plausible.

My rent is due next week, and my final paycheck won't cover the full amount. I've applied for several jobs in my field, but their closing dates are weeks away and time is a luxury I can't afford. It took me nearly a month to find a job when I moved here. There's no guarantee I'll be so lucky a second time.

I spend Friday morning scouring internet job sites. After several hours, I'm feeling a little stir crazy. I need some fresh air and a change of scenery. So I throw on some jogging shorts, lace up my sneakers and go for a run to clear my head.

I moved close to the university so I'd have an easy commute to school. My apartment complex isn't as nice as some of the newer ones built in recent years. But the rent is affordable, which is all that mattered to me when I relocated with six thousand dollars in my checking account. The bulk of that money had been given to me as graduation gifts. The rest I'd managed to save from my housekeeping job. All that's left is two hundred bucks and some change.

I push the depressing thought aside as I hit the jogging trail, the soles of my sneakers slapping against the sun-baked pavement. I've barely worked up a good sweat when my phone rings through my earbuds, interrupting the Billie Eilish song I was listening to.

I slow down and pull the phone out of my pocket. I don't recognize the number on the screen. Maybe it's an employer calling to set up an interview.

I remove my earbuds and eagerly hit the answer button. "Hello?"

"You sound out of breath," a deep voice murmurs.

My heart thumps against my ribs. I should have known I hadn't heard the last of him.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"There's never a good time for you to call, creep."

His low chuckle rumbles through me, heating my insides.

I scowl, swiping at a flyaway strand of hair as I stalk over to a shaded wooden bench and plop down. "What do you want?"

"Did you get the roses?"

"Yes," I grumble.

“That’s good,” he murmurs. “The color reminded me of escaping flames. Scorching, brilliant, combustible. I thought they suited you perfectly.”

I try my hardest not to smile at his words.

“Did you like them?” he asks softly.

“Sure,” I say with a bitchy smirk. “I liked them so much I couldn’t wait to toss them in the trash.”

“Touché.” There’s an unmistakable grin in his voice. He knows as well as I do that I kept the damn flowers.

“What do you want?” I repeat grumpily.

“Why didn’t you tell me you lost your job?”

I narrow my eyes. “How do you know that?”

“I called your references. Your former employers spoke highly of you. Barbara, in particular, couldn’t sing your praises enough. She deeply regretted having to let you go.”

I frown. “Why did you call my references? I told you I’m not taking the job.”

Another infuriatingly sexy chuckle caresses my ear. “I thought I’d give you a few days to reconsider.”

“I haven’t reconsidered,” I snap. “I’m not interested in working for you.”

“C’mon, Marlowe,” he drawls indulgently. “We both know you need the money.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You made it my business when you came to me for a job. Now that I know your predicament, I’m concerned about you.”

“Don’t be,” I grit out. “I’ll find something else.”

“Better than what I’m offering?”

I scowl but say nothing. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of having the upper hand, even though he clearly does.

“Tell you what,” he says silkily. “I’m feeling extra generous today, so I’ll sweeten the deal. Two hundred thousand.”

I gasp in shock, nearly dropping my phone. “*What?*”

“I’ll pay you two hundred thousand dollars to be my housekeeper.”

“Are you insane?” I shriek in disbelief. “Housekeepers don’t make that kind of money!”

“Maybe they should,” he says seriously. “They work damn hard and deserve to be well compensated for their labor.”

I definitely can’t argue with that.

“I want you to come work for me, Marlowe, and I’m willing to make it worth your while. All you have to do is say yes.”

I press a trembling hand to my forehead, trying to think, trying to remember all the reasons I shouldn’t accept his offer. It’s crazy, it’s absurd ... but God, the things I could do with two hundred thousand dollars!

“You’re out of your mind,” I half scold, half whimper.

His low laughter grates on my jagged nerves. “You’re fresh out of college, Marlowe. You’re not going to find another employer willing to pay two hundred grand for your services, no matter how talented you may be.”

I gnaw on my bottom lip. I hate him for being right.

But I still don’t surrender.

“Why are you being so stubborn? You need my money and I need a housekeeper.” He sounds both amused and annoyed. “Don’t be a brat, Marlowe. Take the fucking job.”

“I don’t want your charity,” I grumble.

“This isn’t charity. Believe me, kitten, you’re going to earn every red cent I pay you.”

A shiver runs through my body despite the smothering summer heat.

“I’m meeting some businessmen for breakfast in a few hours,” he calmly informs me. “My job offer expires the second I hang up the phone.”

My throat dries and my heart rate goes berserk.

“I need an answer, Miss Somerset.”

“I already gave you one,” I croak. “You refuse to accept it.”

He’s silent for so long I wonder if he hung up. But no, he’s still there. I can feel him as palpably as if he’s sitting right next to me.

“Will you come work for me?” His voice is low and coaxing, snaking through my veins. “Say yes.”

I close my eyes and swallow thickly, temptation eroding the last of my resolve.

“Yes,” I whisper so softly that I can barely hear myself.

“What was that?”

“I said yes. I’ll take the job.”

“Good girl,” he croons with satisfaction. “I knew you’d come to your senses.”

I can’t help bristling at his arrogance.

“Before you start gloating,” I grit out, “let’s get a few things straight. I need this job. If I don’t work, I can’t pay my bills or keep a roof over my head. If that happens, I’ll have to pack up and return to Pittsburgh with my tail tucked between my legs. That’s not an option for me. So I’ll mop your floors, wash your laundry and scrub the shit stains out of your toilets. But if you think I’m going to be hopping into your bed at night, you’ve got another think coming.”

There’s a long silence, during which I nervously wonder if I’ve just backtalked my way out of the best-paying job I never had.

Finally he lets out a quiet chuckle. “You’re really something, Miss Somerset.”

I swallow hard. “I just—”

“Mrs. Calder will be in touch.”

Before I can say anything else, he hangs up.

Chapter Eight



MARLOWE

HE SENDS A CAR FOR ME a week later.

His driver is an attractive, burly Texan named Trace. He's not the same guy who chauffeured us that night, otherwise I would've given him an earful for participating in Gunner's charade.

He loads up my boxes and suitcases while I say goodbye to Sansa, hugging and kissing her as she purrs in blissful ignorance. I feel guilty for leaving her behind, but I know Quinn will take good care of her.

When I reluctantly put her down, she prances off without a backward glance.

I poke my bottom lip out.

"Don't worry. She won't forget you." Quinn hugs me tight, then pulls back and winks. "Your chariot awaits, Cinderella. Off to the palace you go."

I scowl at her, and she laughs.

Forty minutes later when I arrive at Not-Prince-Charming's estate, Mrs. Calder welcomes me at the front door.

"Trace will bring your things inside. Let me show you to your room." She starts across the foyer. "There's an elevator around the corner, which will make it easier for you to carry your cleaning supplies between floors."

Nodding, I follow her up the grand circular staircase and down a hallway that seems to stretch on forever. I assume she's taking me to a small, modest room in the servants' quarters. So I'm blown away when we end up in a freaking suite with a bedroom, sitting room and private bath overlooking the lake. It's bigger than my entire apartment and luxurious enough to rival a presidential suite in any five-star hotel.

I turn slowly in a circle, looking around in astonishment. "*This* is my room?"

"It is." Mrs. Calder smiles, amused by my reaction. "Mr. Ransom wanted to ensure your maximum comfort. The bathroom is stocked with toiletries and fresh towels, and you'll find five sets of your new uniform in the closet. They must be kept clean and pressed at all times."

I process these details with a nod. "Is he here? Mr. Ransom?"

"No. He's away for the weekend."

I tell myself the twinge in my chest isn't disappointment.

"I'll let you get settled in. When you're ready, come to my office so we can go over your schedule and duties." Mrs. Calder leaves as the driver starts bringing in my stuff.

A few hours later, my boxes are unpacked and my clothes are hung up in the walk-in closet. To personalize the room, I place a few pictures on the bedside table. One photo is of my father and me playing the piano together when I was eight. Another photo captures Sansa sunbathing in a window. The third picture shows Ember and me wearing Steelers jerseys at the last game we attended two years ago. Our faces are painted in black and gold as we mug for the camera with our arms slung around each other's shoulders.

A therapist would have a field day analyzing my mother's absence from my pictures, but that's another story for another time.

When I head down to Mrs. Calder's office, she gives me a tour of the mansion. There are fourteen bedrooms, eleven

baths and too many other rooms to count. The place is immaculate, every surface sparkling.

After the tour, we have lemonade in the sunroom while she goes over my cleaning schedule. It's dauntingly thorough, detailing how each task should be performed and how long it should take.

When she finishes her rundown, she asks if I have any questions.

"No, I think you covered everything." I sip my lemonade and stare out the window, admiring the beautiful gardens. "How long have you worked for Mr. Ransom?"

"Just five years," she says. "But I've known him all his life."

"You have?"

"Indeed. His father and I grew up together in Bullsboro," she explains, smiling faintly. "It's one of those small towns where everyone knows everyone or has at least heard rumors. Dale Ransom was the boy next door, rowdy as a wild mustang. We used to fight like cats and dogs, but there wasn't anything we wouldn't do for each other." She smiles again, her face looking softer in the sunlight spilling into the sunroom.

She's a very beautiful woman. I can tell she must have been an absolute stunner when she was my age. I wonder if she and Gunner's father had feelings for each other.

"Dale left home at seventeen to work on an oil rig," she continues. "He ended up going to college and landing a good job in Houston. You would think he'd struck gold the way he used to call and write me letters, urging me to join him in the big city. I was very tempted, but ultimately I wasn't brave enough to leave our hometown." Her eyes twinkle at me. "Perhaps I could have used your courage."

I smile at her.

She smiles back before picking up her glass, ice cubes clinking. "After Dale got married, he brought his sons home for a visit every summer. He wanted them to know where he came from. He said seeing his humble beginnings would

inspire them to work hard and always strive for the best. Turns out he was right.” She pauses to sip her drink. “After my dear husband passed away, I felt lost and purposeless. My parents were long gone and my daughters had moved away, so there was nothing left for me in Bullsboro. When Gunner invited me to come stay with him, I didn’t want to feel like a charity case. I told him to give me a job, put me to work. After some wrangling, he agreed. And the rest is history.”

I smile quietly, appreciating the story and the insight it provides.

“It goes without saying that I’m proud of the man Gunner has become. He donates generously to worthy causes, and his charitable foundation awards millions in scholarships and grants every year. He also put my youngest through college and helped her land her dream job in New York.” Mrs. Calder smiles softly, allowing me to absorb the magnitude of Gunner’s kindness before she speaks again. “He has a heart of gold, but he’s not always the easiest man to deal with. As long as you perform your duties satisfactorily, you should have no trouble staying out of his crosshairs.”

I nod, not entirely reassured.

She finishes her lemonade and sets the glass down. “I’m glad you accepted the position. I thought you might have changed your mind.”

“I did,” I sheepishly admit. “But Mr. Ransom was very ... persistent.”

Mrs. Calder’s eyes twinkle with a woman’s intuition. “I bet he was.”

I DON’T SEE HIM FOR THE first three days of my employment.

He leaves early in the morning and doesn’t come home until late. According to Mrs. Calder, he starts each day with a workout and then spends long hours at the office, capping off most evenings with business dinners at high-end restaurants.

I'm in no hurry to see him again, so his absence comes as a big relief. As long as he pays me every two weeks, I'm good. The less I have to interact with him, the better.

At least that's what I tell myself.

But lying in bed late at night, I find myself thinking about him. I imagine him pacing the floor of his master suite in the south wing. I imagine him tossing and turning in that massive bed, his body aching for mine until he can't take it anymore. I imagine him sneaking into my room, prowling through the shadows to reach my bed. I imagine him above me, moving deep inside me as I moan his name.

Last night I got so turned on that I rolled onto my stomach and started humping the mattress, desperate for any sort of friction. Visualizing Gunner's smoldering blue eyes and sexy mouth, I reached between my legs and rubbed my clit until an orgasm burst over me, hard and fast.

Afterward I was mortified beyond belief. But that didn't stop me from adding a vibrator to my wish list of things to buy with my first paycheck.

When my shift ends on Thursday evening, I return to my room and treat myself to a hot bath in the huge soaking tub. Luxuriating in the fragrance of lotus blossoms, I close my eyes and try not to think dirty thoughts about my absent boss.

I doze off and wake to the feeling of someone standing over me. But the room is empty, the water has cooled and my skin has turned pruney.

With a lazy sigh, I step out of the tub and dry off with the plushiest towel I've ever felt in my life.

Mrs. Calder is meeting with her book club tonight, so I'm on my own for dinner. Just as I finish getting dressed, there's a knock on my door.

When I open it, I'm surprised to see Mr. Leland standing there.

"Good evening, Miss Somerset." He refuses to call me by my first name, though I've repeatedly asked him to. "Mr. Ransom instructed me to summon you."

“He’s home?” I say, sounding more hopeful than I intended.

“He is, ma’am. And he’s requesting your presence downstairs.”

I frown, wondering if he’s going to reprimand me for some minor infraction. Maybe I didn’t polish the silverware to his satisfaction. Or maybe he didn’t like the way I folded the guest towels, all gazillion of them.

“Miss Somerset?” the butler prompts.

I glance down at myself. I’m wearing a comfy T-shirt and gray yoga pants, and my hair is pulled up in a messy topknot. I consider changing my clothes, then decide against it. I’m off the clock. I can wear whatever I want on my own time.

The butler escorts me downstairs to the elegant dining room, where Gunner sits at the head of a long table sipping wine while listening to Vivaldi’s “Spring.” He looks darkly magnetic in a black dress shirt, his thick black hair shining in the soft chandelier light.

At the sight of him, my stomach does a crazy flip-flop.

There are two place settings with two dinner plates covered by silver lids. An expensive bottle of wine breathes on the table.

Gunner puts his glass down and lets his gaze roam over my body, starting at my feet and slowly working his way up my thighs, stomach, breasts and lips. By the time he reaches my eyes, I feel flushed and stripped bare. Which was undoubtedly his intent.

“Evening.” That liquid sex voice slides through me, raising goose bumps along every inch of my skin that wasn’t already tingling. “How was your day?”

“Fine,” I mumble. “Yours?”

“Productive. I was just about to have dinner.” He motions toward the empty chair on his right. “Join me.”

My mouth goes dry. “I was going to eat in my room.”

“Not tonight.”

Bristling at the authority in his voice, I give him a defiant look. “I didn’t realize dining with the boss was a requirement.”

Those dark blue eyes glint at me. “Is it always going to be a power struggle with you?”

I smirk at him, ignoring the question. “Are you sure you should be eating with the help? It could send the wrong message.”

He raises an eyebrow. “This is my house. I eat with whomever I please.”

I open my mouth to respond, but I can’t think of anything else to say.

“Have a seat, Marlowe.”

I grudgingly obey.

“Good girl.” His voice is deep and rumbly, and hearing him call me good girl sends a rush of heat straight to my core.

He picks up the wine bottle. “Montrachet?”

I hesitate, then nod.

He fills my glass with the white wine. “I trust your accommodations are to your satisfaction.”

I almost laugh. “You could say that.”

His lips twitch. “So you’re settling in okay? Sleeping comfortably?”

I think of my nocturnal cravings and blush. “I am.”

“Glad to hear it. Shall we?” He removes the lid from his plate, and I do the same. The food looks and smells delicious, and I’m hungrier than I thought. But I reach for my glass first to take a fortifying gulp of the rich wine.

Gunner’s eyes gleam as he watches me. “You don’t have to be nervous around me.”

“I’m not.”

“Liar,” he says softly.

“Whatever.” I set my glass down, pick up my fork and cut into my fish. It’s tender and flaky, grilled to perfection. I’m secretly grateful that my duties don’t include preparing meals. I’m a decent cook, but I could never compete with Gunner’s Michelin-trained private chef.

I must’ve sighed or made some sound of pleasure, because Gunner grins at me. “Enjoying the halibut?”

“I am. It’s scrumptious.” A wry smile touches my lips. “Between my luxurious suite and Gustav’s five-star cuisine, I feel more like a guest at the Ritz than the help.”

“Stop calling yourself the help.”

“I’m your housekeeper. That’s *literally* the definition of the help.” When Gunner frowns, I shrug a shoulder. “It’s all good. There’s no shame in domestic work, especially when you’re being generously compensated. Honestly, I’m lucky to have a boss who likes throwing his wealth around. You know what they say about a fool and his money.”

Gunner releases a throaty rumble of a laugh that vibrates through my chest. “Christ, you’ve got a mouth on you.”

I smile sweetly and take a sip of wine as he regards me with glittering eyes. I’m a novelty to him. A pretty toy to amuse himself with. The thought is unnerving.

“You’re home earlier than usual,” I say with forced casualness. “I was beginning to wonder if you actually live here.”

He grins slowly. “You been missing me?”

My face heats. “Not hardly.”

He laughs like he doesn’t believe me.

Trying not to squirm in my seat, I eat a forkful of braised potato and wash it down with another gulp of wine.

Gunner tops off our glasses before resuming his meal. His lashes are so thick and long, fanning his cheeks every time he blinks. I wonder if I’ll ever get used to his gut-punching beauty. Not likely.

“Talk to me,” he says.

“About what?”

“Anything. You, mostly.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“No?” He looks surprised. I’m guessing he doesn’t hear that word very often.

“You ran a background check on me, which means you already know way more about me than I know about you. In fact, given your technical prowess and vast resources, I wouldn’t be surprised if you know how many books I’ve read since kindergarten.”

“I don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Know how many books you’ve read.” His eyes glimmer. “But it’s a fascinating bit of trivia I wouldn’t mind learning.”

“Be that as it may, it’s *your* turn to share.” I smirk. “Now that you’re not impersonating someone else, you can tell me something real about yourself. Like I said, there’s so much I don’t know.”

He looks skeptical. “You expect me to believe you haven’t googled me?”

“I haven’t,” I tell him honestly. “On the way home from my interview, I pulled up your company’s website out of grudging curiosity. As soon as I clicked on your bio and saw your picture, I almost chucked my phone out the window.”

He bursts out laughing, the delicious sound echoing around the room.

I feel my lips twitch. “I was too pissed off to google you. It was only after I accepted your job offer that I went back to your website to learn more about your company.”

“And what did you learn?”

“I learned that you provide tech solutions and security services to corporations and governments around the world.

You have sixty thousand employees and are breaking ground on a new campus next year. You've won numerous industry awards for innovation and technology, and you're consistently ranked a top employer. Mrs. Calder also told me that you give out a ton of scholarships and grants, which is admirable." I pause with my fork poised over my plate. "What I know about you personally is pretty limited."

"I see." He sets his own fork down and reaches for his glass. "What do you want to know?"

"Whatever you want to tell me," I say as if I don't care one way or the other. But I do. I care more than I'm willing to admit.

He drinks his wine as he considers his next words, sorting through what he's willing to share and what he won't. "I was born in Houston. My father worked at Chevron and my mother was a pampered housewife. Maverick—"

"Your twin brother," I interrupt. "Pantheon's executive vice president and chief operating officer."

Gunner smiles at me. "You *have* done your homework."

"I know the basics. So who's older? You or Maverick?"

"I am, by an hour." He chuckles. "Lazy bastard didn't want to leave the warm comfort of the womb. As the story goes, he had to be vacuumed out, and boy did he raise holy hell over it. When the doctor pried him free, he was redder than a matador's cape, shaking his fists and hollering to the rafters. Dad called him the world's maddest evicted tenant."

I burst out laughing.

Gunner smiles, watching me with a fascinated expression. "You have an amazing laugh."

"So do you." The words slip out before I can stop them.

The way his gaze softens makes my body feel as if it's falling from a fifty-story building. We stare at each other, lost in the moment.

Forcing myself to break the spell, I take a sip of wine and then another, trying to find my center of gravity. "Your names

—Gunner and Maverick—sound like a pair of gunslingers in an old western.”

“I know,” he agrees with a wry chuckle. “Dad is a bona fide good ol’ boy who wanted his sons to have the most cowboy-sounding names possible.”

“Mission accomplished.”

“Pretty much.” Gunner smiles. “He named us based on our personalities at birth. He says he chose Gunner for me because I came barreling out first like a sharp-shooting point guard, ready to kick ass and take names.”

“Nice,” I say with a grin. “Seems you’ve lived up to that first impression.”

“I try.” He forks up the last bite of his fish and chews absently. “Where was I?”

“I think you were telling me about where you grew up.”

“Right. Let’s see ... we lived in River Oaks, had servants and chauffeurs, and went to the best private schools money could buy.”

“So you were born into privilege.”

A black eyebrow rises at my tone. “Is that condemnation I hear?”

“No.” I give him a sardonic look. “My mother is a high-powered attorney. I didn’t exactly grow up poor.”

“And yet you had to put yourself through college.” His eyes probe mine. “Why didn’t your mother help?”

My body goes rigid as a bowstring. “We weren’t talking about me. We were talking about you.”

He continues studying me, searching for answers. When they aren’t forthcoming, he wipes his mouth with his cloth napkin and leans back in his chair. “We moved to Dallas after my parents got divorced.”

“Your parents are divorced?”

He nods, his gaze lowering to his empty plate. “My father was a profligate womanizer who chased anything in a skirt. When he worked at Chevron, he had an affair with his secretary. When she quit, he banged the next secretary and the next one, and so on and so forth.” Gunner’s mouth twists cynically. “As you might imagine, his cheating wasn’t exactly conducive to a happy marriage.”

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

He gives a short nod and drains his glass. I can tell there’s a lot more to the story. I remember what Mrs. Calder told me about her longtime friendship with Gunner’s father. If they loved each other, did that affect his marriage? Did he stray because his heart belonged to his childhood sweetheart? It wouldn’t justify his infidelity, but it might explain it.

“Gustav made sticky toffee pudding for dessert,” Gunner announces. “He’s gone for the night, so we’ll have to serve ourselves.”

I smile. “Dessert sounds delicious, but I couldn’t eat another bite right now. I can bring you some if you want, though.”

He shakes his head, watching me with a quiet little smile. “Thanks for your company.”

“You didn’t give me much of a choice.” I stand and start clearing the dishes. When he rises to help, I wave him off. “I got it. It’s my jo—”

“Hush, woman.”

We clear the table together and carry our dishes into the sprawling chef’s kitchen that still dazzles me every time I enter it. Gustav cleaned up before he left, so all we have to worry about are the plates and utensils we used.

Ignoring the state-of-the-art dishwasher, I fill the sink with hot water and add dish soap as Gunner comes up beside me.

“I’ll wash and rinse, you dry and put away.” He rolls up his sleeves, revealing the ropey sinews of his forearms.

My mouth runs dry. “When was the last time you washed dishes?” I ask, slanting him a dubious look. “Do you even know how?”

He looks offended. “What kind of question is that? Of course I know how to wash dishes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. For your information, my brother and I shared an apartment in college, and *I* did most of the cleaning.”

My eyes narrow skeptically. “You didn’t have a maid?”

“No.” He hesitates. “Not till junior year.”

“Ha! I knew it!”

His face breaks into a boyish grin that makes me weak in the knees.

Clearing my throat, I grab a towel to dry the dishes. “Be careful with the wineglasses. You don’t want to scratch them.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he drawls with a wink.

Standing this close together heightens my awareness of him on a primal, cellular level. I can feel the heat emanating from his big body, and the brush of his shirtsleeve against my bare arm sends shivers through my blood. It doesn’t help that he smells so damn good I want to bury my face in his shirt and inhale his scent, take in every molecule of it.

He washes the dishes slowly, leisurely, in no rush to finish the task. If I didn’t know better, I would think he was trying to prolong our time together.

He hands me a plate to dry, his wet fingers grazing mine. Electricity crackles over my skin like I’ve just touched a live wire. My lips part as I stare into his eyes, feeling my heartbeat double.

Long seconds pass.

I’m the first to look away, licking my lips as I dry the clean plate. “What a picture we must make—a gazillionaire washing dishes with his housekeeper. Somebody call *Forbes* or *Guinness World Records*.”

Gunner slants me a crooked grin. “Smartass.”

I let out a shaky laugh. It’s absolute hell being so wildly attracted to a man I want so badly to hate.

Just as we finish our task, Mr. Leland enters the kitchen and stops short, his eyes widening at the domestic scene before him.

Gunner sends a lazy glance over his shoulder. “What’s up?”

“Ahem.” The flabbergasted butler clears his throat. “Will you be needing anything else before I retire for the evening?”

“Nope. I’m good.” Gunner looks at me. “You?”

“I’m fine.”

“Very well, then.” Giving us one last speculative look, the butler says goodnight and leaves.

Gunner and I stare at each other for a long time without speaking.

I’m just about to make my escape when he brushes a stray wisp of hair away from my face, his fingertips caressing my cheek. The gossamer touch makes fire erupt across my skin.

His eyes lower to the goose bumps scattered across my neck and collarbone. The longer he stares, the tighter and heavier my breasts grow, aching for his touch.

When he trails his finger down to my heart, it thumps so hard I gasp.

His gaze darkens before he slides his hand into my hair and cups the back of my head, tilting it so my mouth is just inches from his.

I stare into his eyes, our breaths mingling. I’ve never wanted to kiss someone so badly. I want to taste him. I want to feel his mouth between my thighs and all over my body. I want him to lift me onto the counter and fuck me senseless. But I know once we cross that line, there’ll be no turning back.

He leans in closer, his breath feathering over my lips.

“Don’t,” I whisper.

He pauses, his pupils dilating. I can see the struggle in his eyes, the internal battle to regain his self-control. His fingers tighten in my hair almost to the point of pain, and my core clenches with need.

Finally he releases me and steps back as if he doesn’t trust himself not to touch me again.

We stare at each other for several charged moments, the only sound the barely audible hum of the refrigerator.

“Let’s have some dessert,” he finally murmurs.

I swallow hard and shake my head. “Maybe later.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Suit yourself.” He walks over to the massive center island where his chef set out two dessert plates and spoons. With a flourish, he lifts the cover from one plate to reveal a spongy mound of cake with toffee sauce artfully drizzled over the top.

“Mmm.” He picks up the plate, turning it this way and that. “Looks good, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” The scent of warm toffee and molasses has me drooling.

“You haven’t lived until you’ve tasted Gustav’s sticky toffee pudding.” Gunner makes a show of sliding his spoon through the cake and into his mouth, his eyes closing with a groan that curls my toes. “God, that’s delicious.”

I gulp hard, my thighs clenching.

He shoots me a taunting smile. “Are you sure you don’t want any?”

My mouth is watering like crazy. Am I greedy for wanting the dessert *and* the yummy man holding it?

“I’m good,” I croak. “Really.”

Gunner chuckles softly. “You’re a terrible liar, Marlowe. We both know you want some. Why deny yourself the

pleasure?”

I swallow thickly and shake my head.

“You don’t know what you’re missing.” He drizzles more toffee sauce over the cake and eats another spoonful. “Mmm. *So damn—*”

I scurry over and snatch the plate out of his hand like a hungry bandit.

He throws back his head with a shout of laughter.

Grinning, I scoop up a deliciously gooey mouthful of cake and lick the spoon. *His* spoon. The one that was in his mouth. On his tongue.

His eyes glitter at me as I back away clutching the plate. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist.”

I don’t know if he’s talking about himself or the dessert. Either way, I need to get out of there while I still can.

“Goodnight, Mr. Ransom.”

“Goodnight, Marlowe.” His darkly wicked voice trails after me. “Sweet dreams ...”

Chapter Nine



GUNNER

D OES THIS WINDBAG EVER SHUT UP?

Seriously. Does he ever come up for air?

Seated at the head of the conference table, I glare at my senior VP of global quality assurance. He's discussing the rollout of new government regulations, and I swear he hasn't paused for a single damn breath. Has he always been this long-winded? What the fuck?

As he launches into another spiel, the last thread of my patience snaps.

"Enough." My voice cuts through his babble, shocking him into frozen silence.

Nervous laughter sweeps around the Texas-sized conference table.

"Thank you for your update, Prentice," I say with strained civility. "It's been informative, but we need to move on to the next item on the agenda."

"But I wasn't finished," he blusters, tapping his watch. "I still have two minutes allotted—"

"You can email us the rest of your update," I snap. "We're moving on."

This draws snickers from several other members of the senior executive team. We meet every Friday to review company priorities and address any issues that may have

cropped up over the week. It's a good way to keep the lines of communication open and make sure everyone's on the same page. I implemented the practice when I started the company six years ago. The temperature check meetings—aka “temp-checks”—are absolutely essential to our organizational effectiveness.

So why do I feel as antsy as a Catholic schoolboy forced to sit through catechism class? Why do I want to strangle every last person at the table?

I rake an annoyed glare over their faces. “Whose asinine idea was it to schedule these meetings at two o'clock?”

There's a ripple of uncomfortable throat clearing.

“Yours.” Maverick smirks at me from the opposite end of the table. “It was *your* asinine idea.”

I glower at him.

His pale blue eyes gleam with smug amusement. I hear a few furtive coughs and snickers.

Leaning back in my chair, I let my eyes circle the table, resting briefly on each face. “From now on, we'll meet at ten o'clock.”

Surprised exclamations erupt around the room.

Maverick merely chuckles and shakes his head.

Sedonia Larson, our chief financial officer, rolls her eyes as if to say *The crazy white boy is acting up again*. Which is what she's been saying about me since college.

“Ten o'clock doesn't work for me,” protests our senior VP of corporate development. “I have a standing weekly appointment with my acupuncturist.”

“Not anymore. Pick another time. That goes for all of you,” I growl, looking around the table. “I'm making an executive decision, and I expect you to adjust your schedules accordingly.”

There's a general murmur of confusion and disagreement, but one look at my face warns everyone to back down.

I don't particularly care if they get angry. My brother and I have made them richer than their wildest dreams. They enjoy the best corporate perks and the prestige of working for one of the top global security firms. If they have to put up with my occasional bouts of assholery, that's merely the price of admission.

I drum my fingers on my tablet. "Does anyone have anything else to add before we wrap up?"

Twenty pairs of eyes stare back at me. No one speaks.

"Good. Meeting adjourned." I offer my most charming smile. "Have a fantastic weekend, folks."

This draws some good-humored laughs and grumbles.

Sedonia leans over in her seat to poke me in the arm. "Was all that really necessary?"

"Absolutely," I retort, earning another eye roll.

Sedonia and I met in freshman physics class at UT. She was beautiful and brilliant with a ruthless competitive streak that rivaled mine. We spent the next four years competing for the best grades, becoming friends somewhere along the way. When Maverick and I launched our startup, Sedonia was the first person we hired. She's the perfect CFO. Mentored by business icons, she's a financial wizard and a skilled strategist who reins in our worst impulses. To say she's an integral part of the company would be an understatement.

"One of these days," she says, rising from the table, "I'm going to walk out those doors and never look back."

I chuckle at the toothless threat. "C'mon, Nia. We both know you'd never leave us."

"What makes you so sure?"

"For one thing, you'd miss me too much."

She snorts. "That's what *you* think."

"It's true and you know it," I say, smirking. "Besides, I'd personally make it my mission to decimate any competitor that tried to poach you."

She shakes her head at me. “Crazy ass.”

“You make that sound like a bad thing.”

“Whatever.” Full lips twitching, Sedonia flips her long braids over her shoulder and struts off, heels clicking, leaving me to grin after her.

As the room clears out, Maverick remains behind to bust my balls. “What was *that* all about?”

“What?”

He gestures around the conference table. “All that dick wagging.”

I shrug. “Friday afternoons are a lousy time for meetings.”

“I’ve been saying that for years. Glad you finally saw the light.” Maverick grins, leaning back in his chair with his arms folded behind his head. “As much as we all secretly enjoyed your smackdown of that humorless gasbag, you really shouldn’t antagonize Prentice like that. He’ll defect to a competitor and spill all our company secrets.”

“And he’d be sued into oblivion. Which he damn well knows.” My lips twist into a narrow smile. “Believe me, he’s not going anywhere.”

“Nope,” Maverick agrees with a chuckle. “For all the grumbling he does, that old curmudgeon knows he’s got it good here.”

“Exactly.” I stand and prowl restlessly to the span of windows overlooking the downtown skyline.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I ponder the evening ahead. I’m supposed to be having dinner with some bigshot investors from out of town. The thought of schmoozing over Wagyu steaks and caviar holds zero appeal. I’d much rather go home and dine with my smart-mouthed housekeeper. I’m already missing our verbal sparring matches, and the memory of her snatching my dessert has me smiling. *Pretty little thief.*

“Whoa. What was *that*?”

I glance over my shoulder at Maverick. “What?”

“You sighed. A long, wistful sigh.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You totally did.” He joins me at the window, his eyes scanning my face. “You’ve been acting weird and distracted all day. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing,” I lie. “It’s been a long week.”

He snorts. “You’re a workaholic. *Every* week is a long week, but that’s never bothered you before.” His eyes narrow speculatively. “Come to think of it, you were acting restless last weekend at Granddad’s birthday party. As much as you love that old man, it was pretty obvious you were itching to be somewhere else. Even Mom noticed, and *she* never notices anything that doesn’t involve her or that spoiled furball of hers.”

I snort. “Ain’t that the damn truth?”

Our mother has all the maternal instincts of a box of thumbtacks. She reserves her doting affection for her precious Persian cat, an evil-eyed monster pretentiously named Charlotte Brontë. Mom has never read more than a few pages of classic English literature, which makes her cat’s name even more eye-roll-worthy.

“So what’s eating you?” Maverick persists, bumping his shoulder against mine. “You still thinking about that hottie from the bar? You never did tell me what happened after you snuck off with her that night.”

“Nothing happened,” I grumble.

“Is that why you’ve been in such a pissy mood? Because you didn’t get laid?”

I scowl. “Fuck off.”

He laughs. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I glare at him. “Don’t you have another meeting to attend?”

“Not for another twenty minutes.” He grins, enjoying my irritation as only a twin brother can. “What aren’t you telling

me, Gunn? You know I'm gonna find out sooner or later, so you might as well come clean."

He's right, of course. As close as we are, we've never been able to keep secrets from each other. It's futile to even try. But Marlowe isn't some sorority babe I banged at a kegger back in college. She's not some one-night stand I met at the club. She's different, and as crazy as it may sound, I want to keep her to myself for as long as I can.

"I don't feel like getting into it right now," I finally say. "It's a long story—"

"So there *is* a story," Maverick pounces triumphantly.

"Yes, asshole, there's a story."

He laughs, gleefully rubbing his hands together. "Can't wait to hear it."

I throw him a dark glance.

He grins and props his shoulder against the window, looking suddenly reflective as he stares outside.

I wait for him to speak again, hoping he'll move on to a new topic.

After several moments, he says reminiscently, "Remember how Mom used to take us to Dad's office on Fridays? Remember how he'd put his arms around our shoulders, point out the window and say proudly, 'If you boys work hard and stay out of trouble, someday you can have an amazing view just like this.' Remember that?"

"Of course," I murmur.

Maverick smiles with satisfaction. "Our view blows *his* out of the fucking water."

I merely chuckle, gazing out over the bustling cityscape.

Once upon a time, our father was a senior executive at one of the world's largest oil companies. He was powerful, well connected, a shrewd and highly respected businessman. He worked hard and raked in more money than he could ever spend. But it was never enough for him. He was always

looking for more. After losing a fortune on a bad investment deal, he started drinking and whoring around. When his erratic behavior became a liability, the company severed ties with him.

Plunged deeper into depression, he began gambling, gradually pissing away our family's remaining wealth. We had to downsize to a cramped two-bedroom apartment. By then we were social outcasts, our last name tainted by Dad's ignominious fall from grace.

As his gambling debts piled up, his relationship with Mom grew more strained. They were arguing almost every day, their shouts echoing through the paper-thin walls of our apartment. The more they fought, the more Dad drank and gambled and cheated. When Mom couldn't take it anymore, she filed for divorce and took Maverick and me to Dallas where she grew up.

It wasn't long before Dad followed us, claiming he wanted to be near his boys. Unfortunately, he didn't leave his reprobate ways behind. The drinking and gambling consumed him, destructive demons he couldn't outrun. My brother and I have been cleaning up his messes ever since.

"Enough daydreaming. Back to work." Maverick claps me on the shoulder, his eyes glinting with humor. "Try not to stab anyone at your next meeting. Having our CEO arrested for murder would be seriously bad for business, know what I'm saying?"

I grunt something unintelligible that he somehow understands, making him laugh on his way out the door.

I remain at the window, my thoughts immediately straying back to Marlowe. I can't get her out of my head. Every time I close my eyes, I imagine her puffy pink lips wrapped around my cock. I fantasize about bending her over a polished table and fucking her from behind while spanking her deliciously round ass.

But it's not just her sexy body I crave. I want to know the inner workings of her mind. She intoxicates me. Exasperates me. Fascinates me in ways no other woman ever has.

The background check I ran told me that she has decent credit, no unpaid traffic tickets, an outstanding academic record and generous charitable contributions despite her meager earnings. But it didn't tell me her favorite color, her fondest childhood memory or the name of the first boy she kissed. It didn't tell me where and when she lost her virginity, or why she hasn't. It didn't shed light on her obviously strained relationship with her mother.

In other words, it didn't tell me the things I'm dying to know.

A deeper dive into her background will require the services of my private investigator. Though I'm highly tempted to call him, I've refrained from going that route. I already violated Marlowe's trust by lying to her about my identity. If I want to get to know her better, I'll have to do it the old-fashioned way: by earning her trust and respect.

Easier said than done, I muse wryly.

I feel half out of my mind whenever I'm around her. But I can't stay away. She's absolutely captivating, and I want more. So much fucking more.

Before I can stop myself, I'm pulling out my phone and making a call.

Chapter Ten



MARLOWE

HUMMING ALONG TO MOZART'S PIANO CONCERTO No. 24, I push the vacuum cleaner across the billiard room floor. Just as the concerto floats into the third movement, my phone buzzes through my earbuds.

I turn off the vacuum and reach inside my apron pocket to dig the phone out. I tense when I see my sister's face on the screen. We haven't talked in a while because she's been slammed at work, giving me a welcome reprieve from having to tell her about my new job.

Although I'm making ridiculously good money, I didn't bust my ass for five years to earn a degree, only to end up working as a housekeeper. I'm not ready to break the news to Ember, but I've never been very good at lying to her. If I take her call, I'll end up confessing everything and then she'll try to talk me into moving back home. Which is so not happening.

I stare at my phone, fully intending to decline the call. But my brain misfires and I hit accept instead.

"Hey, you." Ember's warm smile fills the screen. She takes after our mother with dirty blond hair, sea green eyes and enviably high cheekbones.

"Hey, counselor," I say, trying to sound normal. "Finally came up for air?"

"Just for lunch. Mom insisted."

My stomach tightens. "Mom?"

“Yeah. She’s meeting me at the restaurant—wouldn’t take no for an answer. Anyway, I know you get off early on Fridays, so I thought I’d call and see how you’re doing.” Ember looks past my shoulder, curiosity brightening her eyes. “Where are you?”

“Just, um, visiting a friend.”

“Must be a rich friend, judging by the fancy décor.” Ember leans closer to the screen, peering at the wall behind me. “Is that a Jackson Pollock?”

“I don’t think so,” I lie, bringing my phone closer to block her view of the expensive painting.

She frowns at me. “Why are you acting so jumpy?”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You seem nervous. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. You just caught me at a bad—”

“Mom’s here now.” Ember sends me a silent apology with her eyes. “She wants to say hello.”

“What? No, wait, I have to—”

Caroline Somerset’s face appears on the screen before I can bail. “Hello, darling.”

“Hey, Mom.” I try to smile, but my jaw is stiff. “How are you? How’s work?”

“Busy as ever, which means business is good.” She studies me, her eyes narrowed in appraisal. “Have you gained weight? Your face looks rounder.”

The thinly veiled criticism tightens the knot in my stomach. “I’m doing well, Mother,” I say sarcastically. “Thank you for asking.”

“Seriously,” my sister grumbles offscreen. “Knock it off.”

“I just asked a simple question,” Mom huffs. “We all know Marlowe’s weight tends to fluctuate. She gained the dreaded freshman 15 in college—”

“I gained weight, too,” Ember reminds her. “You’ve never given *me* grief about it.”

“Because you lost every single pound. Marlowe kept a few.” Mom gives me a placating smile. “You’re starting grad school next month and I want to send you some nice designer outfits. Why don’t you pan the camera down so I can make sure you’re still the same size?”

I roll my eyes but comply out of habit. I immediately realize my mistake when Mom gasps sharply.

“What on earth are you wearing?” she shrills. “Is that a maid’s uniform?”

Shit!

I bring the phone back up to my face, but it’s too late and now my mother and sister are gawking at me.

“Why are you dressed like a maid?” Mom demands.

I bite my lip, then let out a resigned breath. “I have a new job.”

“What?” Ember exclaims in surprise. “What happened to your job at—”

“I got laid off.”

“Already?” Mom cries. “It hasn’t even been two months!”

“I’m aware of that.”

She gives me an accusing look. “What did you do?”

“Oh, my God, Mom,” Ember says in exasperation. “Can you not?”

Mom takes a big swig of her cocktail as if to calm her nerves. My mere existence tends to stress her out.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I tell her in a tight voice. “They had to make budget cuts. I’m not the only employee who was let go.”

“I’m really sorry, Mar.” Ember’s gentle sympathy comes through the phone like a comforting hug. “I know how much you enjoyed working there.”

“And now you’re back to scrubbing toilets and changing dirty linens.” Mom raises her glass to me in a mock toast. “So much for putting your degree to good use.”

I’m such a disappointment to her. Always have been. I can’t pretend it doesn’t hurt. I’ve just learned to live with it.

She sighs, shaking her head at me. “So who are you working for now? Another hotel?”

“No,” I mumble. “I’m a live-in housekeeper.”

Mom and Ember exchange looks before asking, “Who’s your employer?”

“Um ...” I glance over my shoulder to see if anyone is coming. Satisfied that the coast is clear, I cross the room to open one of the French doors leading out to the terrace.

“So mysterious,” Ember teases. “The suspense is killing me.”

“Indeed,” Mom agrees. “Who are you working for, Marlowe? The governor himself?”

“No.” I walk toward the balustrade overlooking the enormous backyard and glistening lake. “He’s a businessman.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Mom says impatiently. “Stop being coy and tell us his name.”

“It’s Gunner.” I pause. “Gunner Ransom.”

Mom and Ember gasp loudly, their eyes widening in shock. “The tech CEO?”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“Of course we’ve heard of him!” Mom exclaims. “He only happens to be one of the richest men in the country! He’s worth billions and he’s constantly featured in *Forbes*, *GQ*, *Money*, you name it. Honestly, you’d have to be living under a rock not to know who he is!”

“I didn’t know who he was,” I admit with a shrug. “But I figured that was because I’m not from Texas, and I don’t move in business circles like you guys do. If he was a famous artist, that would’ve been a different story.”

“Silly girl,” Mom chides, but there’s no scorn in her voice. In fact, she’s staring at me with pure, unadulterated delight—something I’m not used to. “How did you land a job as Gunner Ransom’s housekeeper? More important, how much is he paying you?”

I hesitate, chewing my bottom lip. “Two hundred thousand.”

Mom and Ember’s stunned faces almost make me laugh.

“*Two hundred thousand dollars?*” Ember squeals.

I can’t help grinning. “Crazy, right?”

“Good heavens,” Mom bursts out incredulously. “You’re making more than your sister makes with a law degree!”

“Seriously.” Ember is grinning wide. “Maybe I need to quit my thankless job and move down to Texas to become a housekeeper.”

“Or to catch a rich husband.” There’s a calculating gleam in Mom’s eyes. “Marlowe can work her charms on Gunner, and you can do the same with his brother.”

Ember and I groan in disgust. “Don’t even—”

“Marlowe?” a stern voice calls from inside the house.

Shit!

“I have to go.” I rush off the phone and hurry back inside just as Mrs. Calder turns to leave the billiard room. “Did you need me?”

She turns around. “Oh, there you are. I was wondering where you’d gone off to.”

I blush at being caught slacking on the job. “Just getting some fresh air. Sorry.”

“Don’t be, dear girl. You’re allowed breaks.” Mrs. Calder has a leather garment bag folded over her arm. “Mr. Ransom is having dinner with some important investors this evening. He asked that you bring him a fresh change of clothes.”

“Right now?”

“Of course.” She walks over to hand me the garment bag. “Take the Range Rover. The company’s address is already programmed into the GPS.”

“Um. Okay.” I glance down at my gray uniform. It’s double-breasted with a fitted waist, an A-line skirt, and a white collar and cuffs. Without the apron, it could almost pass for a stylish dress.

Still, I’d feel pretty weird showing up to Gunner’s office in a maid’s uniform. “Should I change?”

“I’d rather you didn’t. The longer you wait, the worse traffic gets.”

“Especially on a Friday.”

“Precisely.” When I don’t move right away, Mrs. Calder briskly claps her hands. “Chop, chop, off you go.”

I almost curtsy. “Yes, ma’am.”

PANTHEON GLOBAL SOLUTIONS IS HEADQUARTERED IN a glistening skyscraper overlooking West Second Street. The impressively sleek building has forty floors of office space, two five-star restaurants, a bar and cigar lounge, and a spa and fitness center.

Following Mrs. Calder’s instructions, I park at the private entrance in the back. A security guard is waiting to escort me up to the top floor, which houses the company’s C-suite offices.

Emerging from the elevator, I step through double glass doors opening onto a glossy reception area. The huge circular desk is manned by two receptionists wearing headsets and beauty pageant smiles.

They look me over as I approach, taking in my gray dress and white sneakers before chorusing, “May I help you?”

Before I can respond, a striking redhead materializes to intercept me. “You must be Marlowe,” she says smoothly, shaking my hand. “I’m Veronica, Mr. Ransom’s executive assistant. He told me he was expecting you.”

“Yes, I brought him a fresh suit and shirt.”

The assistant's perfect eyebrows furrow in confusion. "A suit?"

"Yes. For him to wear tonight." I hand over the garment bag I'm holding.

Veronica gives it a puzzled look before her professional mask slides back into place. "Thanks for dropping this off. I'm sure Mr. Ransom will appreciate it."

"No problem. Just doing my job." I smile, preparing to leave. "It was nice meeting—"

"He asked you to wait in his office."

"What?"

"He's in a meeting, but he requested that you wait for him."

"Oh." I wasn't expecting to see him, and I'm not sure I want to. But it doesn't sound like I have a choice in the matter.

"He shouldn't be too long. Right this way, please." Veronica escorts me past the reception desk and through a set of imposing glass doors. We head down a long corridor that forks off in two directions, both leading to corner suites.

"That's the COO's office." Veronica points to the right before steering me left, through an anteroom. "And this is the CEO's."

My jaw drops when we walk through the double doors. The office is gargantuan, all pristine glass and sleek chrome. One entire glass wall frames a commanding view of downtown Austin. Another wall showcases an impressive collection of abstract paintings.

Veronica strides forward, her shapely calves flexing with each step. I watch as she opens a closet door to hang up Gunner's suit ... next to several other suits.

Wait a damn minute.

"He already has—"

"Yes, he always keeps a change of clothes here for emergencies, and for the days he works out during lunch."

Veronica shuts the closet door and turns. “Maybe he wanted a different colored suit.”

“Maybe,” I mutter, but I’m not buying it.

Veronica studies me with undisguised curiosity. “How long have you worked for Mr. Ransom?”

“I just started this week.”

She nods.

“What about you?” I ask.

“Three and a half years. He hired me right out of grad school.” Veronica smiles. “He can be pretty tough and demanding, and sometimes his people skills need a little work. But his brilliance is undeniable. I’ve learned a lot from him, and he never forgets birthdays and anniversaries.”

This bit of information pleases me more than I care to admit. “I’m glad you’ve had such a positive experience working for him.”

“Me, too. I can honestly say he’s the best boss I’ve ever had.” Veronica smiles again. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Um, no thanks. I’m good.”

She gestures toward the seating area. “Make yourself comfortable.”

After she departs, I walk slowly around Gunner’s inner sanctum, admiring the high-end furnishings and expensive modern art. I don’t even want to speculate on how much money was spent decorating this office.

After taking in the view for a few minutes, I turn from the window and wander over to the humongous desk. I wish I could say that Gunner is overcompensating, but based on the substantial bulge I felt in his pants that night, the man has *nothing* to compensate for.

The desk is covered with files and papers. There are no photographs or personal mementoes. No squishy stress balls, logo-laden mugs or other tchotchkes. It’s the desk of a

ruthlessly disciplined man who works slavishly hard, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

When I googled him—which I finally did—I was impressed to learn that he developed and patented an anti-spyware app while in grad school at UT. The innovative software product attracted a slew of investors who gave him the funds to launch his startup. Now, at age thirty, he reigns over a tech empire with offices in more than forty countries around the world.

As if that weren't impressive enough, he also owns a hydrogen energy company, luxury hotels in France and Switzerland. And, of course, the club he took me to the night we met.

I trail my fingertip along the edge of his desk, eyeing the high-backed executive chair. It looks like a throne, so big and commanding that I'm tempted to sit in it.

Biting my lip, I look over my shoulder to see if Gunner is coming. Not seeing or hearing anything, I round the desk and lower myself into the large chair, sighing as my body sinks into the plush black leather. It feels heavenly, and I can smell the faintest trace of Gunner's cologne beneath the rich material.

Greedy for more, I twist around in the seat and sniff the headrest like a bloodhound following a scent trail. While cleaning Gunner's bedroom yesterday, I took a picture of his cologne bottle—some European luxury brand I'd never heard of before. I sprayed a little on my wrist so I could indulge my secret addiction for the rest of the day. I also took several deep whiffs of his shampoo and body wash.

Creepy? Yes. Pathetic? Abso-freaking-lutely.

My phone's musical ringtone goes off. I fumble it out of my purse and stare at the screen. Not recognizing the number, I answer tentatively, "Hello?"

"Marlowe? This is Dawson."

"Dawson?" I can't hide my surprise. I thought I'd never hear from him again.

He chuckles. “Don’t tell me you forgot me already.”

“Of course not.” I smile. “How are you?”

“Good, good. Keeping busy, working hard. Speaking of which,” he says excitedly, “I hear you got a new job working for Pantheon’s CEO.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m his housekeeper.”

“Cool, cool. Gotta start somewhere, right?”

Is that a dig?

“So what’s the bossman like?”

“He’s ...” *Impossibly beautiful. Infuriatingly cocky. Bone-meltingly sexy.* “He’s fine. I hardly ever see him.”

“No shit. The guy didn’t get filthy rich by sitting around on his hands all day.” Dawson sounds almost infatuated. “So, listen, Barbara told my mom what happened the night of our date. I’ll admit I was pretty annoyed that you left with some other guy. But it was partially my fault for not calling sooner to tell you I was running late. I’d still really like to meet you, if you’re game.”

“I am,” I say with more enthusiasm than I feel.

“Great,” he replies, sounding pleased. “I’m going out of town this weekend. Are you free next Saturday?”

“Next Saturday?” I hedge.

“Yeah. I thought we could go out to dinner.”

My smile feels forced. “Sure. We could do that.”

“Awesome.” He chuckles. “I’ll pick you up this time so there won’t be any mixups.”

I blush. “That’s probably a good idea.”

He chuckles again. “I’m meeting with a client so I gotta run. Text me your address when you get a chance.”

“Will do. See you next Saturday,” I say just as I hear Gunner’s growly voice approaching.

Panicking, I grab my purse and jump to my feet. But he's already striding through the door, yanking his tie loose as he barks into his Bluetooth headset.

Catching sight of me behind his desk, he slows his steps. My heart pounds into my throat as I stare back at him.

Today he's wearing a light blue shirt beneath a hand-tailored gray suit that's obviously very expensive. He looks grumpy, a little scary and a whole lot sexy.

Without taking his eyes off me, he ends his call with a curt "Just get it done." Then he pulls off the headset, tosses it onto the desk and plows a hand through his gorgeous hair.

I lift an eyebrow at him. "Bad day?"

He scowls. "Been in one fucking meeting after another."

"Oh." I watch as he shrugs out of his jacket and comes around the desk to drape the garment over the back of his chair. His tailored shirt clings to his massive chest, and I can tell he's seriously ripped.

I swallow hard. "Um, I'll just get out of your—"

"No. Stay." He puts his hand on my shoulder, the heat from his fingers burning through my uniform like a hot brand. "Sit. Please."

I sink back down in the chair, curling my fingers around the padded arms.

He perches a hip on the edge of the desk, the expensive wool of his pants pulling taut across his muscular thighs.

I have to forcibly drag my gaze away. My cheeks have grown embarrassingly warm, and other parts of me as well.

He slowly looks me over, taking in the way my uniform hugs my body. The dress isn't too short, but I keep my knees pressed together so he can't see anything I don't want him to see.

"So what were you doing at my desk?" he murmurs. "Snooping?"

"No! Of course not! I was just—"

“Relax. I’m only teasing you.” His eyes glitter at me. “I like seeing you in my chair.”

“You do?”

He nods. “You look right at home.”

I grin, leaning back. “It’s a fabulous chair. Super comfortable, excellent back support. An ergonomic dream.”

His lips quirk. “Ergonomic dream?”

“Yeah. Where’d you get it?”

“Had it custom made. I can order one for your room if you want,” he offers. “Can’t have you studying and doing your schoolwork in an uncomfortable chair.”

“Oh, my desk chair is perfect. Seriously. I don’t need a new one. But thanks for—” I break off when I realize that he’s laughing at me. I watch him for a few moments, feeling my lips twitch. “What’s so funny?”

He shakes his head. “I can’t believe we just had an entire conversation about office chairs.”

I grin. “*You* started it.”

“Indeed.” He grins and folds his arms in front of him, his biceps straining against his shirtsleeves. “That reminds me, if there’s anything you ever need or want for the house, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Really? Anything?”

“Anything.” His grin stretches with a hint of sexual teasing. “Within reason.”

“Yes, Mr. Ransom,” I simper.

He winks at me.

We’re flirting, and God help me, I’m enjoying every delicious moment.

“Mr. Ransom?” his assistant’s voice crackles over the intercom on his desk. “Sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Kemp called to ask if he could bring a guest to dinner tonight.”

“That’s fine, Veronica.” The muscles in Gunner’s thighs flex as he hooks his foot under the desk chair and drags me closer. My body heats up as I stare into his hooded eyes.

“Call the restaurant to update the reservation,” he instructs his assistant.

“Yes, sir. Right away.”

Gunner gazes at me as the intercom goes silent.

Swallowing thickly, I lower my eyes to his Brioni loafers. “You have big feet.”

“Think so?”

“It’s not debatable. They’re huge. What’s your shoe size?”

“Fourteen.”

“Wow.” A strange knot of need tightens in my stomach. When I look up at Gunner, there’s a thoroughly wicked gleam in his eyes.

“And now you’re wondering if the old saying is true,” he taunts.

“No, I’m not.” *I don’t have to wonder. I already know.* “Anyway, why’d you ask me to bring you a change of clothes?” I demand, gesturing toward the closet. “You already have a bunch of suits to pick from.”

A slow, shameless grin spreads across his face. “Busted.”

“What the hell?” I sputter irately. “I wasn’t done cleaning, and now I’m gonna have to deal with rush hour traffic on the way home.”

“You don’t have to hurry back. I’m giving you the rest of the day off.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Laughter dances in those stunning blue eyes.

Still somewhat irritated, I wave my hand at him. “Do you always wear suits to work?”

He glances down at himself, his brow furrowing. “What’s wrong with that?”

“For starters, haven’t you ever heard of Casual Fridays?”

“I—”

“You’re a tech CEO. You’re supposed to wear nothing but jeans and hoodies to show everyone how cool and hip you are.”

His mouth twitches with amusement. “I travel extensively to conduct business with foreign executives who don’t observe casual dress codes. Plus my father always wore suits to the office, and I guess it left an indelible impression on me.”

I can’t help smiling at his words. “It was the same with my mother. Power suits and heels. Every day, no exceptions.”

“Yeah?” Gunner’s eyes glow with keen interest. “She’s a partner at a big law firm, right?”

I nod.

“What did she think of you moving away from home?”

I hesitate. “She thought I was making a mistake. But that’s nothing new.”

“What do you mean?”

My lips twist sardonically. “Let’s just say she doesn’t have the greatest confidence in my decision-making abilities.”

Gunner’s eyes probe mine. “Is that why you’re not close?”

“It’s one of the reasons.”

He looks like he wants to hear more, but I’m done sharing.

“I’d better get going.” I push to my feet, hooking my purse strap over my shoulder. “Have a good time at dinner tonight.”

He gives a slow nod, his gaze trained on my lips.

When I try to move past him, he captures my wrist. I shiver at his touch, our eyes meeting and holding.

“Who was on the phone?” he asks casually.

I blink at him. “What?”

“You were just getting off the phone when I came in.”

“You saw that?”

“I see everything.”

Those three words send tingles up and down my spine. “I was talking to Dawson.”

Gunner’s eyes narrow. “Who’s Dawson?”

“The guy I was supposed to meet that night.” I smirk. “The guy you impersonated.”

“Ah.” He doesn’t look the slightest bit embarrassed. “What’d he want?”

I pull my wrist free. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“Tell me anyway.”

The nerve of this man!

“If you must know, he asked me out on a date. You know, since our first date was sabotaged by *someone* who shall remain nameless.”

Gunner chuckles, still totally unashamed. “What’d he say when you turned him down?”

I narrow my eyes. “What makes you think I turned him down?”

“Didn’t you?”

“No. I didn’t.”

Gunner shakes his head, a slight glimmer in his eyes. “You’re not interested in Dawson.”

I lift my chin. “How do you know who I’m interested in?”

“I’ve got good instincts about these things.”

“Your instincts are wrong,” I retort.

“Are they?” He rises slowly to his feet, looming over me.

I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry. His gaze follows the movement, sending heat through my veins.

“When’s your date?” he asks softly.

“Next Saturday.”

“Hmm.” He reaches out and touches my chin, the barest brush of fingertips. “I’m afraid you won’t be available next Saturday.”

I frown, feeling disoriented. “Why not?”

“I’m having a dinner party that night, and your services will be needed.”

“But I’m off on Saturdays,” I protest.

He raises an eyebrow. “What part of ‘performing other duties as required’ did you not understand during your interview?”

Hot anger flares inside me. “Why is this the first time I’m hearing about your dinner party? Mrs. Calder hasn’t said a word.”

He shrugs. “It must have slipped her mind.”

I don’t believe him. Not for a damn second.

“Looks like you’ll have to reschedule your date with David,” he drawls.

“Dawson,” I snap.

“Right. Dawson.” Lips twitching, the big jerk brushes past me to sit in his chair, leaning back with his fingers steepled in front of his face as he contemplates me. “What took him so long to get in touch with you?”

“What?” I’m distracted by the way he looks behind his desk, brimming with masculine power and authority.

“Your date was two weeks ago,” he says calmly. “Why did he wait this long to reschedule?”

“What difference does it make?” I snap.

“I’m just curious. Aren’t you?”

I let out a huff of exasperation. “Maybe he’s been busy. Or maybe he was pissed because I left the bar that night with another man. Can you blame him?”

Gunner gives me a long, speculative look. “Does he know you work for me?”

I frown. “Why?”

“Does he?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

I glare at him. “Are you suggesting that’s the reason he called me? Because I work for a famous tech billionaire, and he wants to use me to curry favor with you?”

Gunner’s eyes gleam. “Sounds like you’ve already drawn your own conclusions about Romeo.”

I hate him for reading me like an open book.

“I’m done with this conversation.” I pivot and march toward the door.

“Don’t waste your time with that guy,” he calls after me. “It wasn’t meant to be.”

I flip him off, not caring that he’s my boss.

His dark, sexy laughter follows me out the door.

MY SISTER CALLS ME THAT EVENING as I’m stuffing clothes into an overnight bag.

I’m spending the weekend at my old apartment with Quinn and Sansa. After the maddening encounter with Gunner, I don’t trust myself not to sneak into his bedroom tonight and strangle him in his sleep.

When I answer the phone, Ember whispers excitedly in my ear, “Oh, my God! I’m still in shock over the bombshell you dropped earlier! I’ve been dying to call you back to get all the deets!”

I frown. “Why are you whisper-shouting? Where are you?”

“In the bathroom at work.”

“It’s almost nine o’clock there. You’re still at the office?”

“I’m an overworked first-year associate. Where else would I be but at the office?” The trace of bitterness in her voice makes me wonder, not for the first time, if she loves being a lawyer as much as she claims.

“Mom couldn’t stop talking about your new boss. Has she called you?”

“Yes. Twice.”

“You didn’t pick up?”

“What do you think?” Hearing the sound of a toilet flushing, I wrinkle my nose. “Are you doing number one or two?”

Ember snickers. “Relax. I just had to pee and change my tampon. Anyway, I can’t believe you work for an actual billionaire!”

“Don’t get too excited,” I say darkly. “It’s overrated.”

“Are you crazy? How can working for Gunner Ransom be overrated?”

“You’d be surprised,” I grumble.

“What do you mean? Is he an asshole?”

I toss another shirt in my bag. “Let’s just say we got off to a rocky start.”

“What happened? And don’t tell me you don’t want to talk about it,” Ember warns. “You’ve been keeping secrets for three freaking weeks, and that’s simply not how we operate. Unless you want me to fly down there and kick your ass, you better start dishing.”

With a sigh, I proceed to tell her the whole story, starting with the night I met Gunner and ending with today’s vexing office encounter.

“Holy shit,” Ember says when I finish. “Ho-lee shit.”

“Basically,” I mumble under my breath.

“So let me get this straight. The hot guy you mistook for your date—and almost fucked—turned out to be Gunner

Ransom, the billionaire you now work for?”

I grimace. “It sounds even worse hearing it summarized like that.”

My sister laughs. “I don’t know what shocks me more—the shady stunt he pulled or his outrageously generous job offer. He’s got some serious balls.”

“You have no idea,” I mutter.

“Oh, I can imagine.” Ember cackles lasciviously.

I bite my lip. “Do you think I’m crazy for accepting the job?”

“Are you kidding? He’s paying you two hundred grand. I don’t know anyone who would have turned down that kind of money, especially in your predicament.” The sound of running water can be heard as Ember washes her hands. “What are your hours?”

“Seven-thirty to four. I’m off on weekends.” *Except next weekend*, I think sourly.

“Since you’re in grad school, does he offer flexible scheduling?”

“Yeah. My work schedule will be adjusted once classes start. He’s also paying my tuition. All of it.”

“Seriously? That’s freaking awesome!”

I smile. “It was definitely a big selling point.”

“No kidding.” Ember sounds thoroughly pleased. “So ... I just have to ask.”

“What?”

“How far is his bedroom from yours?”

I scowl. “Why the hell does that matter?”

“Because he wants to fuck you,” Ember says with a dirty laugh. “And you want to fuck him, too.”

I feel my cheeks warm. “Just because I want to doesn’t mean I intend to.”

“Mmm. At least you didn’t deny the mutual lust.” Ember rummages noisily in her handbag, probably searching for lipstick. “You know, as an employment attorney, I could rattle off a litany of reasons why you absolutely shouldn’t sleep with your boss. So many things could go wrong. Frankly, it’s a recipe for disaster.”

I puff out a breath. “I’m not sleeping with my boss.”

Ember chuckles. “Famous last words, kiddo. Famous last words.”

Chapter Eleven



MARLOWE

DESPITE THE RIDICULOUSLY SHORT NOTICE, THE mansion's enormous living room is overflowing with guests the following Saturday. At least two hundred people have showed up for Gunner's impromptu dinner party. It's the not-to-be-missed social event of the weekend, apparently.

I'm stationed at the front door to greet arriving guests. They're the movers and shakers of Austin: tech executives, entrepreneurs, billionaire investors, socialites with massive trust funds.

They pour out of chauffeured cars in designer tuxedos and glittering evening gowns. I can practically smell the power, luxury and privilege wafting off them. It makes me feel like a pauper in my plain white blouse, slim black skirt and tall black pumps—the uniform assigned to me for special events.

During a lull in arrivals, I sneak down the hall to peek in on the party. Strains of Chopin float romantically through the air as the guests mill around laughing, chatting, sipping champagne and nibbling hors d'oeuvres.

In the center of the room, Gunner is swarmed by a small crowd. He's wearing a bespoke tuxedo, one hand tucked casually in his pocket.

He looks so good it takes my breath away—and pisses me the hell off. I don't want to find him attractive. After the way he cockblocked my date with Dawson—*again!*—I want to

stay mad at him. But it's so damn hard when the mere sight of him sends my hormones into a tailspin. After not seeing him all week, I find myself drinking in every smile, every wink, every lift of his sexy eyebrow as he converses with his guests.

He rocks a tux like no man I've ever seen, and I positively hate him for it.

Gnawing my lower lip, I watch as he raises his champagne glass to his mouth. As if sensing my gaze, he turns his head and looks straight at me.

All the air leaves my lungs.

He stares at me for a long moment, then slowly takes a sip of champagne without breaking eye contact.

Pulse rioting like crazy, I duck out of sight and hurry back to my post by the front door.

Hearing the roar of a motorcycle, I open the door to see a man rumbling up to the house on a black Kawasaki Ninja. He's wearing a black tux with black cowboy boots.

I watch as he kills the engine, lowers the kickstand and pulls off his helmet to reveal thick dark hair spilling over a drop-dead gorgeous face. I instantly recognize him as Maverick Ransom, Gunner's twin brother.

He runs a hand through his hair, trying but failing to tame the unruly locks. I watch with equal parts fascination and enjoyment as he smoothly climbs off the bike and flashes a grin at Mr. Leland, who's overseeing the valets tonight. The two men exchange a few laughs before Maverick glances toward the house to see me lurking in the doorway. His lazy grin widens, a white slash against his dark beard stubble.

Holy smokeshow!

After a few more moments of banter, he claps Mr. Leland on the shoulder and then starts up the front steps. He's built the same as Gunner—tall and broad shouldered with narrow hips and long legs. Though fraternal twins, their square-jawed good looks are similar enough to leave no doubt that they're brothers.

As Maverick reaches the top of the steps, I open the door wider to let him in.

He stares at me in stunned recognition. “Holy shit. The babe from the bar.”

I can’t help smiling. “I knew you looked familiar when I saw your picture on Pantheon’s website. You were there the night I met your brother.”

“I was.” He grins down at me, as insanely sexy as his twin. “Gunner didn’t tell me you were coming tonight.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice. I work for him.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. I’m his new housekeeper.”

“Is that right?” Maverick slowly looks me over and grins, shaking his head. “That sneaky son of a bitch.”

“You can say that again.” Some petty impulse makes me confide, “Did he tell you that he impersonated my date that night?”

Maverick blinks at me. “Come again?”

“I mistook him for the guy I was supposed to meet, and he kept up the charade until my real date called and blew his cover.”

Maverick stares at me in disbelief, then bursts out laughing.

The sound is so rich and infectious that I feel my lips twitch. “I’m glad you find it amusing.”

“I’m sorry,” he says between sexy chuckles. “What Gunner did was dead wrong. But it’s totally unlike him. He doesn’t do shit like that.”

“Well, he did.”

Maverick grins. “I apologize on his behalf. Sincerely.” His eyes are lighter than his brother’s, an icy blue that sucks you right in and locks you in place. “What’s your name, beautiful?”

“Marlowe.”

He shakes my hand, his skin warm and slightly callused. “Pleasure to meet you, Marlowe.”

“Same to you.” I smile. “A ton of people have been asking for you, Mr. COO, so I guess you’d better get in there and start schmoozing.”

He grins. “How long are you on door duty?”

“Just until the last guest arrives. Then I’ll be helping the waitstaff.”

Maverick’s eyes twinkle at me. “I’ll find you,” he promises before sauntering off to join the party.

Half an hour later, I’m weaving through the crowd offering champagne on a silver tray. I feel invisible, completely insignificant in this glitzy world of elites. Such a thing wouldn’t normally bother me. But tonight, for some reason, it does.

As I circulate around the room, I can’t help stealing glances at Gunner. He still has a crowd buzzing around him, and now there’s a tall blonde latched onto his arm. She’s gorgeous in an off-the-shoulder silver gown that hugs her sleek curves. I don’t remember greeting her at the front door, so she must have arrived late.

My focus is broken when someone swipes the last flute of champagne from my tray. Instead of returning to the kitchen to replenish my supply, I drift behind a marble column to continue secretly watching Gunner.

He’s telling a story, gesturing with one hand as he talks. His audience looks enthralled, hanging on his every word. At one point the blonde tilts her head back and laughs, showing off perfect white teeth.

When Gunner smiles at her, I feel a strange twist in my chest.

“Having fun?”

I jerk, startled, and nearly drop my empty tray.

Maverick catches it, laughter dancing in his eyes. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I, uh, was just, um—”

“Spying on your boss?”

Heat floods my face.

Maverick laughs. “Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.” He hands my empty tray to a passing server.

I frown at him. “I need to get more cham—”

“Relax. They’ve got it covered.”

“But—”

“No buts. You’re taking a break, I insist.”

I give him a wry look. “No offense, but you’re not the Ransom who signs my paychecks.”

He grins. “Touché.”

When another server approaches offering champagne, Maverick takes two flutes from the tray and hands one to me.

I shake my head. “I can’t. I’m work—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” He overrides my protest, pressing the chilled glass into my hand. “You need to loosen up a little, let your hair down. It’s gorgeous, as I recall.”

I can’t help grinning at him. “You’re gonna get me in trouble.”

“Who, me? Never.”

“Yeah right,” I laugh. “Something tells me you have *plenty* of experience leading women astray.”

“I have no idea what you mean. Cheers.” He taps his glass against mine.

I look around guiltily before sneaking a sip of champagne.

“Atta girl.” Maverick’s eyes gleam with wicked approval. “So you *are* corruptible.”

“Apparently so.” I grin and swig more champagne.

“Her name’s Laurene, by the way.”

I blink at Maverick. “Who?”

“The blonde you were glaring at a minute ago.”

My cheeks burn. “I wasn’t glaring.”

Maverick grins knowingly but doesn’t argue with me.

After a few moments, I find my gaze wandering back to the woman clinging to Gunner’s arm. “Old girlfriend?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

“Ex-fiancée.”

I feel a jolt of surprise. “Your brother was engaged?”

Maverick chuckles. “Shocking, isn’t it?”

I nod and gulp more champagne, watching as the blonde eases closer to Gunner. Any closer and they’ll be fused together.

“She’s a hotel heiress,” Maverick volunteers.

“Really?” Of course Gunner dates heiresses. He’s a superwealthy sex symbol with a plethora of beautiful women at his disposal. He doesn’t have to go slumming with the hired help—me, specifically.

“So what happened? Why’d they break up?” When Maverick hesitates, heat rises in my cheeks. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to pry.”

“You’re not.” Maverick lifts his glass to his lips. “Laurene thought Gunner worked too much. She wanted him to spend more time with her, whisk her away on romantic trips, be more attentive.” The corner of Maverick’s mouth tilts up as if he’s amused. “Gunner didn’t respond well to her ultimatum, so she broke up with him.”

“*She* ended the engagement?”

Maverick nods. “She learned the hard way that ultimatums rarely work in favor of the people demanding them. She wants him back and is hoping they can work things out.”

“Oh?” I feel like I have cotton in my throat. “Well, I wish them the best.”

“Mmm.” Maverick sips his champagne, pale blue eyes studying me over the rim of the flute. I wonder what he sees in my face. I don’t think I want to know.

Gunner suddenly glances in our direction, his eyes narrowing with something resembling displeasure. The blonde follows his gaze and frowns, first at me and then at Gunner.

A knowing chuckle rumbles out of Maverick. “Interesting.”

“What?” I ask.

“Watch this,” he murmurs, shifting closer to me. When Gunner’s expression darkens, Maverick laughs a wicked laugh that could have come from the devil himself.

I shake my head at him. “If I get fired, I’m blaming you.”

He chuckles. “No worries, beautiful. Believe me, you’re not going anywhere.”

I don’t know what that means. Before I can ask him to elaborate, he winks at me and then saunters off into the crowd. Two women immediately glom onto him, simpering and batting their mink lashes.

Resisting the urge to look in Gunner’s direction, I drain my glass and make my way to the kitchen. The caterers are bustling around preparing dinner. I’m nearly mowed down by a server rushing past with a tray of hors d’oeuvres.

Across the kitchen, Mrs. Calder is conferring with the catering director. She’s been super bossy all evening, ordering everyone around like a maniacal drill sergeant. I don’t want to get in her crosshairs, so I grab a tray of champagne flutes and hurry back to the party.

My bosshole and his ex are drifting through the crowd, laughing and mingling with other guests. Determined to keep my distance, I head to the opposite side of the room and remain there.

My avoidance strategy seems to be working until I spot Gunner and Laurene moving in my direction. I feel a cold stab in my gut when I make eye contact with the blonde. Before I can pivot and scurry away, she raises her hand to summon me as if I'm a waitress at a restaurant.

Smothering a curse, I start forward with my tray carefully balanced on one hand. Gunner watches me come closer, his expression intense yet guarded. It's so unnerving that I have to force myself to relax and breathe before I end up dropping the drinks I'm carrying.

When I reach the couple, Laurene plucks a flute off my tray, her silvery green eyes raking me from head to toe. With her icy blond hair and sun-kissed skin, she's even more gorgeous up close. Intimidatingly gorgeous.

"Gunner tells me you're his new housekeeper," she says haughtily.

I nod, smiling. "He was kind enough to hire me when I needed a job."

"That's my Gunner," she sighs, smoothing a perfectly manicured hand down his chest. "Always a champion of the underdog."

"Indeed," I murmur, meeting Gunner's silent gaze. "He's been very generous."

Laurene narrows her eyes. Flawlessly garbed in haute couture, she oozes glamour, wealth and sexy sophistication. Next to her, I feel drab and dowdy in my servant's attire.

I hold out my tray to Gunner. "More champagne?"

He slowly takes a glass, his eyes never leaving my face. "Enjoying the party?"

"Absolutely, sir," I gush like some breathless ingénue. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be on a Saturday night."

A faint glimmer of amusement sparks in his eyes. I can almost hear him calling me smartass, and I want to laugh.

Laurene divides a look between us and frowns, then sets her untouched glass on my tray with a sharp clink. "So

Margaret—”

“Marlowe,” I correct.

She blinks innocently. “Isn’t that what I said?”

“You said Margaret. It’s Marlowe.”

“My apologies.” She barely contains a smirk. “I can’t make out your accent. Where are you from?”

“Pittsburgh.”

“Goodness. You’re a long way from home, aren’t you?” She eyes me suspiciously. “Do you plan to stay in Texas permanently?”

“Um—”

“She just got here,” Gunner drawls with wry indulgence. “She’ll cross that bridge when she finishes grad school.”

“Right.” I smile at Laurene. “What *he* said.”

Her lips tighten with displeasure.

Gunner regards me silently, running his thumb around the lip of his glass. I stare at his long fingers and can’t help remembering the way they felt inside me, stroking, thrusting, bringing me to the hottest orgasm I’ve ever had in my life.

As heat floods my cheeks, I lift my gaze to his. I can tell by the devilish gleam in his eyes that he knows exactly what I was thinking about, and he likes it. Bastard.

Laurene waves at someone across the room and then links her arm with Gunner’s, clearly staking her claim for my benefit. “Let’s go say hello to Hugh. I want to hear all about his new yacht, and maybe you can talk him into throwing one of his fabulous sunset parties next month.”

Gunner downs his champagne and places the empty flute on my tray, looking me in the eye as he murmurs, “We’ll let you get back to work.”

“Of course. Enjoy yourselves.” I smile sweetly and walk off. Hazarding a glance over my shoulder, I catch Gunner

staring back at me with the barest hint of regret before he and Laurene disappear into the crowd.

I serve champagne until my tray is empty. On my way back to the kitchen for a refill, Mrs. Calder intercepts me.

“You play the piano, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I reply, giving her a wary look. “Why?”

She motions to the gleaming concert grand piano tucked into a corner—wing raised, strings exposed, ivory keys shining. “I’ve seen you admiring it every time you clean the living room. Why don’t you play something for our guests before dinner?”

“Oh no,” I say hastily. “I haven’t played in months. I’m so rusty—”

“This isn’t Carnegie Hall, dear. No one is expecting Mozart.” She plucks the tray out of my hand, ushers me over to the Steinway and practically shoves me down onto the bench.

Several people glance our way. A few start drifting over, lured by the prospect of an entertaining performance. Others soon follow, and before I know it, a large crowd has gathered.

I gulp hard as I look around. Maverick stands near the front of the crowd with an attractive woman on each arm. Laurene stands off to one side, fingering her diamond choker as she watches me with a look of bored disinterest.

Gunner, thankfully, is nowhere in sight.

“This piece was composed by my father,” I nervously announce to my audience. “It’s called ‘Blue Wish.’ His work isn’t well known, so I’m hoping if I mess up a few times, you won’t know the difference.”

Laughter ripples through the crowd. Maverick grins at me, his eyes gleaming with appreciation. Mrs. Calder gives me an encouraging nod.

I can’t remember the last time I played “Blue Wish.” But as my fingers start moving over the keys, the familiar melody comes back to me, and suddenly I’m transported back to my

childhood, sitting at our old piano and plinking out the notes of the song under my father's proud gaze.

Just as my nerves are starting to settle, I look up to see Gunner framed in the entryway.

Our eyes lock.

The connection is palpable, jolting me so hard that I almost hit the wrong note.

He starts slowly toward me, his eyes never leaving mine as the crowd makes room for him.

My palms become clammy with sweat. I force myself to look down at the piano keys, focusing on the music and not my battering heart or the weight of his gaze.

When I finish the song, the crowd bursts into applause. Maverick claps the loudest and whistles his approval.

Gunner just stares at me. His face shows no emotion, but his blue eyes seem to burn brighter. Hotter.

I stand and take a bow, grinning as the applause grows louder.

Laurene starts whispering in Gunner's ear. He nods distractedly and scrapes a hand through his hair, a now familiar gesture that betrays his agitation.

Mrs. Calder walks up to me with a delighted smile—the first such sighting of the night. “That was lovely, dear. You play quite well.”

“Thank you,” I say sheepishly. “I'm so out of practice.”

“I don't think anyone noticed. But you're more than welcome to practice on the piano anytime you want.”

“Really? You don't think Mr. Ransom will mind?”

“Why would he? He spent a fortune on that piano and it hardly ever gets any use. Besides,” she adds with twinkling eyes, “he clearly enjoyed your playing.”

“Think so?” I can't hide my uncertainty. “He's hard to read sometimes.”

“I’ve known him all his life and I can read him like a book. Believe me, he was very pleased.” Mrs. Calder tucks her arm through mine and winks. “Let’s go check on dinner, shall we?”

The party moves outdoors, where paper lanterns strung across the lawn sway in the evening breeze and candles glow on tables covered with white linen. Soft jazz drifts through the open air, soothing and romantic.

The guests mingle after dinner, wandering from table to table as they enjoy the pleasant summer night.

Now that I’m off the clock, a hot bubble bath is calling my name. But instead of heading up to my room, I slip off my heels and make my way down to the dock. The grass beneath my feet feels warm and spongy, stretching down to the water’s edge.

Passing a large boathouse with an upper deck, I walk to the end of the dock and sit down, letting my legs dangle over the edge. The moon reflects off the glassy surface of the lake, the water rippling under a soft breeze.

I tug the elastic band off my ponytail and shake my hair loose with a deep sigh of appreciation.

It’s been a long day but I really can’t complain, especially not after receiving my first paycheck yesterday. When I saw the healthy sum deposited into my checking account, I felt like I’d just won the lottery. Not only was I able to pay all of my bills two months ahead, I even had enough funds left over to make a generous donation to my favorite animal shelter. I also gave Quinn seven hundred dollars to cover Sansa’s care expenses and buy something nice for herself. She balked at the amount and had to be bullied into accepting it. But she did, with tearful gratitude.

With more money on the way and a warm breeze caressing my face, all feels right with the world.

When I hear footsteps behind me, goose bumps break out across my body. I don’t look over my shoulder to see who’s approaching. I already know.

He comes to a stop beside me, silently staring out over the lake. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that his tuxedo jacket is gone and his shirt is untucked, the sleeves rolled to his tanned elbows.

I wait for him to speak, my heart beating faster with each passing second.

“Beautiful night,” he says quietly.

I nod without looking at him.

He sits down beside me, his long legs dangling over the water. My pulse races, every breath filled with his scent. I can feel his heat, can practically taste him on the air.

“Thanks for all your hard work tonight,” he tells me.

I force a shrug. “Just earning my pay.”

“Mrs. Calder says you’re doing a wonderful job. I happen to agree.”

I look at him then. “Does your fiancée know where you are right now?”

His eyes flash in the moonlight. Then he chuckles, sounding both amused and annoyed. “I see my brother has been running his mouth.”

I cross my ankles. “We’ve become friends.”

“Is that right?” Gunner gives me a lazy half smile. “You like him better than me, kitten?”

“I like everyone better than you.”

His deep laugh rumbles through the night air. I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling.

“Such a smartass.” He shifts closer, his muscular leg pressing warmly against mine. My heart stutters and my thighs clench beneath my skirt. I should move away from him, but I don’t. Truthfully, I don’t want to.

When a breeze blows my hair across my face, he brushes back the loose strands, looking into my eyes. “I’m not engaged to Laurene. Not anymore.”

I search his face. “But you might get back together, right? That’s why she’s here tonight, isn’t it?”

He stares down at me.

I find myself holding my breath, half dreading his answer even though his love life is none of my business.

He looks away without responding, staring up at the stars. “That was an incredible song you played. Your father wrote it?”

I let out a small breath and nod. “It was the first song he ever taught me.”

“Yeah?”

I nod again. “He used to give piano lessons to earn extra money. As a kid, I loved peeking around the corner and eavesdropping on him. He always knew I was there, but he pretended not to see me. One day after his student left, he sat me down at the piano and played one of his new songs for me. I loved it so much that I begged him to teach it to me. He did, and many other songs after that.” I laugh quietly. “We both knew I wasn’t a child prodigy or anything. We just cherished our father-daughter bonding time.”

Gunner smiles, his expression almost tender as he watches me. “That’s a wonderful memory.”

“It is,” I say softly. “I have lots of them.”

“Then you’re very lucky.”

I smile at him before we both fall silent, gazing out across the moonlit water.

“It’s really beautiful out here,” I whisper, as if not wanting to break the spell. “You must love living on the lake.”

“It’s nice.” He pauses for a few moments. “I was thinking about taking the boat out tomorrow. Maybe you’d like to join me.”

I swallow hard and lick my lips before looking at him. His gaze locks on my mouth, sending hot flutters to my core.

“I couldn’t keep my eyes off you tonight,” he confesses huskily. “I couldn’t focus on my guests or the conversations I was supposed to be having. I couldn’t think of anything but you.”

I stare at him, my heart pounding like thunder in my ears. “Gunner—”

He touches a wayward strand of my hair, following it down to the end. His gaze lingers there before slowly, very slowly, lifting to my face.

Heat twists my insides. Heat and longing.

As we stare at each other, everything else ceases to exist—the starry sky, the shimmering lake, the distant music from the party. In that moment, it’s just him and me and our insanely powerful attraction.

Then a woman’s voice calls out, “Gunner!”

We both turn our heads to see Laurene standing at the other end of the dock. Even from a distance, her anger is palpable.

I look at Gunner.

He silently returns my gaze.

A minute passes, my heart counting each second until he stands and gently pulls me to my feet. When he kneels down to help me step into my heels, I think of the dashing prince sliding the glass slipper onto Cinderella’s foot, and my stomach flutters.

But I’m not Cinderella, and Gunner Ransom is no Prince Charming.

Even if I’m starting to wish he was.

Chapter Twelve



GUNNER

I WATCH MARLOWE HEAD BACK TOWARD the house, her dark hair gleaming under the moon before she disappears into the shadows. She said she's going to bed. What I wouldn't give to join her.

"Gunner." Laurene cups my cheek in her hand, forcing me to meet her angry gaze. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"I don't know," I murmur. "Is there?"

Her eyes narrow sharply. "What the hell is going on between you and Marlowe? Are you sleeping with her?"

"No."

"But you want to," she hisses accusingly. "It's so damn obvious you want to fuck her."

I don't deny it. What would be the point?

"Unbelievable!" Laurene shrieks, jabbing her finger into my chest. "It's only been a month since we broke up, Gunner. *One fucking month!*"

I grab her hand before she can poke me again. "You need to calm down," I bite out. "*You're* the one who ended things, remember?"

"Because you were neglecting me!" she yells in my face. "All you cared about was your precious company! You never had any time for me!"

“That’s not true,” I growl. “You wanted every second of my time. The more I gave, the more you demanded. It was never enough for you and you know it.”

She yanks her hand from mine, her chin quivering like a petulant little girl’s. “Why didn’t you invite me to the party tonight? Why did I have to hear about it from other people?”

I frown. “We’re not together anymore—”

“I know that,” she snaps. “You don’t have to keep reminding me.”

I shake my head at her. “What do you want from me, Laurene?”

“I want you to tell me that you’ve missed me as much as I’ve missed you. I want you to admit that I’m perfect for you and we belong together.”

I silently regard her. She’s gorgeous, wealthy and well connected. As the daughter of a hotel magnate, she’s my natural counterpart—the kind of woman I’m supposed to end up with. I care for her. I wouldn’t have proposed if I didn’t. But right now, standing before her, I don’t say the words she wants to hear.

I can’t.

And that’s pretty damning.

She stares at me, her eyes narrowed and accusing. “I know what this is about. You’re punishing me.”

I frown. “What’re you talking about?”

“You’re punishing me for breaking up with you.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are!”

“*No*. I’m not.” I rake a hand through my hair and blow out a hard breath. “Look, this isn’t a good time. I have guests—”

“That didn’t stop you from following your little maid down here for a moonlit tryst.” Laurene sneers at me. “Were

you watching her the whole time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to sneak off after her?”

“I’m not having this discussion,” I say through gritted teeth. “I’m going back to the party. You can stay here or come back with me. It’s up to you, but I’m leaving.”

She makes a huffing noise and stomps after me, her arms folded mutinously across her chest. We don’t exchange another word until we reach the party. Couples are dancing under the stars, swirling and laughing like a scene out of *The Great Gatsby*.

Trying to smooth things over, I ask Laurene to dance.

“I’m going to powder my nose.” She flounces off, still sulking.

As if on cue, a server approaches with a tray full of glasses and a bottle of Glenfiddich. “Whiskey, Mr. Ransom?”

“Hell, yes.”

He pours me a glass and hands it to me. I take a deep, grateful swig as my brother comes sauntering over, a knowing grin on his face.

“Rough night?”

“Fuck off,” I grumble.

He laughs. “You mean having your ex and your new plaything at the same party *wasn’t* a good idea? Shocker.”

I shoot him an annoyed glare. “Marlowe’s not my plaything.”

“I agree. She clearly means more to you than that.” Maverick searches my face in that unnerving way of his. “Why didn’t you tell me she’s working for you?”

“I didn’t realize I had to make an announcement every time I hire a new housekeeper.”

“Bullshit,” Maverick scoffs, grinning. “You’ve been obsessing over that woman since the night you met her. The fact that you secretly gave her a job is a big deal, and you know it.”

I merely grunt and down more whiskey.

Maverick stands beside me watching the dancing crowd. “Why would you invite Laurene—”

“I didn’t. She invited herself.”

“Of course she did.” Maverick chuckles dryly. “I see it didn’t take her long to zero in on her competition. Which is no surprise, given the way you were blatantly eye-fucking Marlowe. Jesus, Gunn. You’re in even worse shape than I thought.”

My gut tightens at his words, but I don’t bother contradicting him. He’s right. I *am* in bad shape. I threw a whole dinner party just to prevent Marlowe from going out with another man. If that’s not pathetic, I don’t know what is.

Maverick grins sideways at me. “Did you really impersonate her date that night?”

I scowl at him, and he laughs.

“Holy shit, bro. What the hell?”

“It wasn’t one of my finest moments,” I mutter.

“Clearly.” Maverick chuckles and shakes his head. “She’s a real firecracker. After the shitty stunt you pulled, you’re lucky she agreed to come work for you. We both know her talents would be better served elsewhere.”

I grunt agreement and knock back the rest of my drink. In my mind’s eye, I can still see Marlowe playing the piano, as hauntingly beautiful as a painting. The image is seared into my brain, probably forever.

My brother studies me for a few seconds before speaking again. “You’ve always had a rule about not sleeping with employees. Hell, just to play it safe, you even hired a lesbian as your assistant.”

I scowl. “Veronica’s sexual orientation had nothing to do with her getting the job.”

“Maybe not. But it’s sure as hell easier to avoid temptation if your hot assistant isn’t into dudes. The point is, since Dad

banged every secretary he ever had, you swore you'd never be like him. Has that changed?"

My hand flexes around my empty glass. "No."

Maverick is silent, but I know he doesn't believe me. I don't blame him. Hiring Marlowe clearly conflicts with my rule against mixing business with pleasure. I knew that when I offered her the job, but it didn't matter. I wanted her here with me, and nothing was going to stop me from making it happen.

"So now that you've got her under your roof," Maverick drawls, "what're you going to do about Laurene?"

I exhale a heavy breath. "I don't know."

"I think you do."

In silence I watch Laurene emerge from the house, every strand of hair tucked into place, makeup flawless. She glides through the crowd, smiling and tinkling with laughter, supremely aware of the heads that turn as she passes.

She's stunning. Dazzling. The belle of the ball.

And I've never wanted her less than I do at that very moment.

It's not her fault, really. She's the same woman I proposed to seven months ago. She hasn't changed in any way.

But there's only one woman I want right now, and no one else will do.

Chapter Thirteen



MARLOWE

SOMETIME AFTER MIDNIGHT, UNABLE TO SLEEP, I creep downstairs to the kitchen for a glass of water.

A few steps into the room, I pull up short.

The full moon shines through the windows, so bright I don't need the light to see. What I see, unfortunately, is Gunner standing in front of the massive open refrigerator.

Shit!

I don't want to deal with him, so I start backing slowly out of the room.

Suddenly he looks over his shoulder and sees me.

I freeze on the spot, unable to move.

He closes the fridge and turns slowly to face me. He's shirtless and wearing black pajama bottoms that ride low on his hips, revealing the V of muscles that disappear below the silk waistband.

Holy hell, I think as lust twists my stomach into an almost painful knot. He has the body of a freaking gladiator. Wide, powerful shoulders for days. Hard, defined pecs like paving slabs. Six-pack abs I could do laundry on.

The man's body is even hotter than I imagined. How is that possible?

“Hey.” His low voice rumbles like an expensive engine in the stillness of the room. “Couldn’t sleep?”

I bite my lip and shake my head.

His eyes sweep over me, burning my skin like a tactile touch. I suddenly feel naked in my Steelers nightshirt that stops midhigh.

I curl my toes into the tile. “I ... I just came to get some water.”

He gestures lazily toward the fridge. “Don’t let me stop you.”

I hesitate. Every fiber of my being is warning me to bolt, but I force myself to cross the room and take a glass from the cabinet. As I fill it with filtered tap water from the sink, I can feel Gunner watching me.

The heat of his gaze sends prickles along my exposed flesh. I really wish I’d put on a robe before coming downstairs, but how was I supposed to know I’d run into my boss at this late hour? Why was he poking around the fridge anyway? Didn’t he get enough to eat at his lavish dinner party? God knows there was enough food to feed a small country.

Irritated by his presence and my chemical response to him, I drain my glass and fill it with more water that I gulp down in three swallows.

“Feeling a bit dehydrated?” His voice is a sardonic drawl. “Maybe you shouldn’t have imbibed so much champagne tonight.”

My back stiffens defensively. “I only had one glass.”

“Three,” he corrects. “You had the first glass with my brother. Your next two glasses were chugged down between bites of lobster as you huddled in the shadows during dinner.”

I place my empty glass in the sink, then turn to face him. He’s leaning back against the refrigerator, arms folded across his wide chest. His hair is messy and his eyes are glittering sapphires piercing into me.

I feel compelled to explain myself. “Mrs. Calder had me running around before the party, so I didn’t get a chance to eat dinner. As for the champagne—”

“You were working,” he interrupts. “I don’t pay you to drink on the job.”

A guilty flush heats my cheeks. “Sorry,” I mutter, feeling chastened. “It won’t happen again.” *Jerk.*

He nods once before pushing off the fridge and moving toward the center island.

I stare at him, grudgingly fascinated by the way his muscles shift in the moonlight, bunching and rippling beneath his tanned skin. My mouth waters to taste those lickable V grooves at his waist.

“Like what you see?”

My eyes snap up to his face. His knowing smirk makes me bristle. Cocky fucking bastard.

I cross my arms under my breasts. “Shouldn’t you be hurrying back upstairs to your clingy ex?” I taunt. “I’m sure she’s waiting for you with bated breath and open legs.”

“Actually,” he drawls, “she’s not here.”

“What?” I say with exaggerated shock. “You mean she didn’t spend the night to keep a close eye on you?”

“Should she have?” he counters, an amused glint in his eye. “Am I in danger here? Are you planning to seduce me?”

I snort. “In your dreams.”

“Or maybe yours.”

My face burns hotter than ever. “I don’t dream about you,” I scoff.

His eyes gleam. “Never?”

“Nope.”

“Liar,” he says in that panty-disintegrating voice. Good thing I’m not wearing any at the moment.

“Look—” I break off, watching as he slowly rounds the center island and backs me up against the counter. I hate that my knees wobble and my heart pounds faster.

Swallowing hard, I let my eyes drift up his chest and past his throat before coming to rest on his face.

Without breaking our stare, he reaches out and brushes the pad of his thumb over my lips.

I. Am. Not. Breathing.

“Maybe I was wrong,” he murmurs. “Maybe you *shouldn’t* have taken this job.”

“Why not?” I croak.

“Because I’ve never fucked an employee in my life, and you’re going to make me break my own rule.”

My whole body quivers at his words.

Trying to play off my reaction, I smirk at him. “You mean to tell me you’ve never messed around with some starry-eyed assistant or intern?”

“I haven’t.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Ask me if I give a damn.”

We glare at each other, locked in a haze of hostility and lust that charges the air around us.

Just to show him I’m not intimidated, I stretch on tiptoe to bring my gaze more level with his. My eyes only reach his chin, but the directness of my stare lets him know I’m no pushover.

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes. “Leave.”

“*You* leave.”

“I was here first. And it’s my house.”

“That I keep spotless every day,” I retort.

His eyes narrow.

I narrow mine right back.

“If you don’t leave,” he warns in a frighteningly low voice, “I won’t be responsible for what happens next between us.”

His words make me break out in violent goose bumps. But I don’t move. I *can’t*.

His jaw clenches. “Walk away, kitten. If you don’t want this to go any further, leave right the fuck now.”

I lift my chin defiantly, looking him straight in the eye. “No.”

He makes a rough noise in his throat, then grabs my face in his hands and takes my mouth in a kiss so deep, so carnal, that I forget to breathe.

“You’re driving me crazy.” His voice is a raspy groan. “Why can’t I get you out of my fucking head?”

I whimper as he shoves his hands into my hair, gripping me tight as his tongue plunges into my mouth, exploring, demanding. I tremble as he licks at the corners of my lips and sucks my tongue with a controlled aggression that disintegrates my bones.

Just as my knees are about to buckle, he tears his mouth from mine and buries his face in the side of my neck. “Leave, goddammit.”

I shiver at the raw plea in his voice. He’s barely hanging on to his control, and I’m just crazy enough to want to push him over the edge.

“Make me,” I whisper in his ear.

With a feral growl, he yanks me hard against him, lifting me up as I wrap my legs around his hips. The feel of his massive erection against my crotch makes me gasp.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he rumbles, gripping my ass and grinding his pelvis into mine.

A needy moan breaks from my lips.

Lowering me onto the counter, he runs his fingers through my hair and licks the hollow of my throat, sending a tremor of want rippling through me. As my thighs clench, he pulls my

nightshirt up and over my head, causing me to shiver as goose bumps break out over my exposed skin.

He makes a guttural sound of appreciation. Then he's kissing his way down my throat to my chest, his tongue tasting every inch of skin between. When his hot mouth closes over one breast, I gasp and arch back, my hands fisting in his hair.

He swirls his tongue around my nipple, licking and biting lightly. I tremble hard, aching for more, and when he sucks the tight peak against the roof of his mouth, I mewl with pleasure.

Gunner is growling—*growling*—and it's the sexiest damn sound I've ever heard in my life. When his callused hands slide down to spread my thighs, it's only then that I remember where we are.

“Not here,” I choke out. “Someone might—”

He's already sweeping me up and striding from the kitchen, carrying me through the darkened foyer and up the winding staircase.

Somewhere between the kitchen and his bedroom, common sense and sanity should have kicked in. But nope, both have deserted me.

When we reach the master suite, he carries me across the gleaming wood floor and lowers me to the center of a bed big enough to have its own zip code. The bedside lamp is on, and there's a book lying open on the nightstand.

Leaning over me, Gunner slowly peels off my tiny pajama shorts, baring my pussy to his gaze.

The wild, dark look in his eyes intensifies the pulsing ache in my core. I want to feel him against me, on top of me, deep inside me, the weight of his big body pressing down on mine.

“Gunner,” I whisper, my voice a plea.

He stares down at me, his eyes glittering with a feral hunger that should have made me get up and run. “You don't know how much I want you, Marlowe. Your taste. Your skin. Every inch of your beautiful body, every sweet dip and curve.

Since the night we met, I've been dying to make love to you. I need you so fucking bad it hurts."

Oh. My. *God*.

He pushes my thighs apart with his forearms and kneels between my legs. When he touches his tongue to my hooded clit, I arch off the bed with a strangled gasp.

"Sweet little kitten," he rumbles, his eyes searing into mine. "I'm going to make you come so hard you'll feel me for days."

"Oh God," I whimper, so turned on I can barely see straight.

He slides his hot tongue around my clit, sucks it softly and then harder. The sensation has me crying out, my belly spasming and my nipples tightening into hard, tingling knots.

He licks me again, his tongue flicking at my pussy lips and teasing them apart so he can taste my juices. I gasp his name, my head thrashing against the pillow that smells like him.

He growls something dirty and grips my ass, holding me to his mouth as his tongue lashes at my sensitized clit like it's forbidden fruit, making my entire body sizzle.

Moaning with pleasure, I cup my aching breast and tweak my nipple with my thumb, my other hand fisting in the sheets.

When he slides one thick finger inside me and twists, my eyes roll back in my head. He inserts another finger and sucks my clit as I pant and moan, riding his face with desperate little jerks of my hips.

"That's good, baby. So fucking good." He consumes me like he can't get enough, nibbling and sucking, licking and tormenting until I'm ready to scream. When he spears me fully with his tongue, I shatter against his mouth, throwing back my head with a keening wail.

He holds my shaking thighs apart as he laps up my juices, tonguing my pussy to draw out my pleasure.

As I slowly drift back down to earth, I open my eyes to find him above me. His mouth slants over mine, slick and

warm with my scent.

“You’re so fucking delicious,” he rumbles. “Are you on birth control?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Good.” He nuzzles my breasts, lavishing attention on my puckered nipples. “I get tested regularly, and I’m always clean. I’ll wear a condom tonight, but I can’t promise to remember every time. That’s how crazy you drive me.”

I quiver at his words before he pulls away and shoves down his pajama bottoms, his cock bouncing free.

I can’t stop the moan that leaves my throat. He has the biggest, most beautiful dick I’ve ever seen in my life. It’s long, thick and deliciously veiny. I’m practically drooling, eager to lap up the glistening bead at the tip.

He grabs a condom from the nightstand drawer, tears open the packet and deftly sheaths himself. Then he stretches out over me, powerful arms braced on either side of my head as he settles between my thighs.

With his velvet-blue eyes locked on mine, he drags the fat head of his cock along my slit. I suck in air, my stomach clenching with arousal and anticipation.

He enters me slowly, so slowly, stretching me to the limits.

“Gunner,” I moan as my muscles clamp around him.

“God, you’re soaked.” He pushes deeper into me, his big muscular thighs spreading my legs wider. It feels so good, so illicitly erotic, that tears spring to my eyes.

He strokes my hair, watching me intensely as he pulls out on a slow slide. “You okay, baby?”

I bob my head quickly and lock my ankles behind his back, giving him an enthusiastic green light to proceed.

He pushes back in so slowly I think I might lose my mind. Then he begins a steady rhythm, the rounded muscles of his ass clenching as he thrusts in and out of me.

“Oh, my God,” I gasp and arch my back, my breasts smashing against his chest.

He shudders and bites his bottom lip hard, his eyes fixed on mine with dark carnality. “You’re so damn sexy, sweetheart. Where the fuck have you been all my life?”

His words and the primal hunger in his voice send a wild thrill through me. Delirious with pleasure, I look down to where we’re joined, watching his thick cock disappear inside my pussy and slide out again, glistening with my wetness. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

He leans down to kiss me, his abs rippling as he presses his hips into me over and over, each thrust deeper than the one before. The delicious, grinding friction has me teetering on the edge of another orgasm.

“God, Marlowe,” he groans with satisfaction. “Nothing has ever felt this good.”

“Never,” I agree, raking my nails down his back and making him hiss out a raspy moan.

We stare into each other’s eyes as he grips one of my legs in his hand, driving into me at an insanely deeper angle. My body tightens until I’m nothing but a trembling mass of ecstasy, screaming his name as my orgasm rips through me. My eyes slam shut at the shocking pleasure of it, my thighs quaking uncontrollably as Gunner groans in my ear.

He barely lets me catch my breath before he pulls out and flips me over on all fours. The room swirls out of focus as he wraps my hair around his fist and thrusts into me from behind.

I keen breathlessly at the new angle, overwhelmed by the heat and pressure of his cock. His other hand grips my waist, anchoring me to him as he begins stroking my G-spot, penetrating me even deeper than I thought possible. I moan loudly, squeezing my eyes shut as need roars through my blood and curls my toes.

He fucks me thoroughly, masterfully dominating me with every thrust as he slams his cock into me, his hips smacking

against my bottom. My breasts slap together in time with his relentless strokes, my scalp tingling as he pulls my hair.

“Oh God,” I mewl. “Oh God, oh God, oh God!”

An animalistic groan rumbles out of him as he cups a bouncing breast in his other palm. When he rubs my pebbled nipple, my womb convulses and my body shakes all over.

Growling my name, he slides his hand down my stomach, his fingers spearing through the drenched curls between my thighs. As he thumbs my swollen clit, I bury my face in the pillow to smother my wild cries, the position tilting my ass high in the air.

“Fuck, yes,” Gunner groans roughly and lengthens his strokes, my knees coming off the bed as he thrusts harder and faster, pounding deep into my body. He fucks me like a man possessed, his fingers digging into my hip bones, keeping the base of his cock flush against me when he explodes with a savage shout.

I sob at the force of his release, my pussy spasming and squirting around his shaft as I climax again.

I feel him shudder with pleasure before he leans over my back, kissing his way down my spine and slapping my ass cheek. Then he lets go of my hair and we collapse to the bed in a tangle of sweaty limbs, gasping for breath.

“Holy fuck,” he says on a long exhale against my hair.

“You can say that again.” I just had three orgasms in a row. *Three*. That’s never happened before. It’s practically a miracle.

Gunner reaches down and pulls the covers over us, drawing me closer with his free arm. I lay my head on his shoulder, my breasts flattening against his side and my hair fanning out over his warm chest. My eyelids are heavy, my body still humming with tiny electrical jolts.

He nuzzles the top of my head with his cheek. “That was fucking incredible.”

“Mmm. Beyond incredible. I can’t feel my legs.”

“Mine are pretty shaky, too,” he rumbles.

I smile with pleasure. “Guess we really rocked each other’s —” Suddenly my eyes snap wide open. “Oh no!”

“What?”

“My nightshirt! We left it downstairs in the kitchen! If someone finds it—”

“Relax. I’ll get it.” He continues nuzzling my hair.

After a few moments, I lift my head to stare down at him. “It’s kinda urgent.”

“Uh-huh.” He gives me a lazy smile and traces my collarbone with his finger.

“Gunner,” I whine.

“Don’t rush me,” he grumbles. “I’m trying to savor the afterglow here. And you need to burn that shirt anyway.”

“What? Why?”

“It offends me as a lifelong Cowboys fan. Mrs. Calder should’ve told you that I don’t allow Steelers paraphernalia in my home—”

“Seriously?” I sputter.

“Seriously. I’ll let you keep the shirt because it looks hella sexy on you. But I’d better not find one of those Terrible Towels—”

“*Can you just get my damn shirt, please?!*”

He laughs at my exasperated outburst.

“Fine, fine,” he relents, easing away from me. As he climbs out of bed and grabs his pajama bottoms off the floor, I sit up, clutching the covers to my chest.

“Can you also shut my bedroom door? I don’t want anyone to know where I slept.”

“*Slept?*” He sends me a rakish glance over his shoulder, tousled locks falling over his forehead. “You think you’ll be getting any sleep tonight, kitten?”

My pulse quickens at his words. Biting my lip, I admire his perfectly round ass as he heads to the bathroom to dispose of

the condom. He reemerges wearing his pajama bottoms, his hair even messier than before.

“Be right back,” he says with a wink.

After he leaves, I nestle my face in his pillow with a dreamy smile, enjoying the lingering effects of my orgasms. My pussy aches and I should probably pee, but I’m too lazy to get up. I’m going to sleep like a baby tonight. That’s *if* he lets me, which doesn’t seem very likely.

He returns shortly with two glasses of water and my nightshirt slung over his shoulder. Watching him saunter toward me, I feel my tummy flutter with butterflies. He’s the sexiest man I’ve ever met in my life. Sexier than any man has a right to be.

He hands me a glass and drains the other in one swallow before licking his lips and meeting my mesmerized stare.

“Drink,” he commands.

I obey, gulping down half the water.

“Good girl.” He takes my glass, sets it on the table next to his and tosses my nightshirt aside. Then he strips off his pants and slides back into bed, pulling me on top to straddle him. With my breasts mashed against his chest, he kisses me slow and deep, skimming his hands down my back to cup the swell of my ass.

By the time he eases his mouth from mine, my thighs are shaking and my whole body aches for him like an addict.

As he stares up at me from under heavy eyelids, I rise over him and rub my pussy along his shaft, wetting him with my juices.

He shudders with pleasure, his jaw tightening. Still gripping my ass cheek with one hand, he takes his cock in the other and pushes into me just the tiniest bit.

My breath catches sharply, need shivering through me. Staring into his hooded eyes, I plant my hands on his chest and slowly circle my hips while sliding down another inch.

“Holy shit.” His voice is a guttural rasp. “You’re killing me, sweetheart.”

Grinning, I sink all the way down until my ass rests on his thighs.

He groans, his neck arching off the pillow. He’s so freaking big, and I’m so achingly full. It’s almost more than I can take.

“Move,” he orders hoarsely. “Fucking move before I lose it.”

The rawness of his words floods my pussy with heat.

“As you wish, Mr. Ransom.” With that I begin riding his cock, moving slowly up and down, giving him no reprieve until we both explode in screaming orgasms.

Chapter Fourteen



MARLOWE

I *FUCKED MY BOSS. I CAN'T believe I fucked my boss.*

That's the first thought that hits me when I wake up in the morning.

The second thing I register is that we're still in bed together. His arm lays heavy across my waist, curled protectively around me as we spoon. His body is big and warm and solid as a rock, making me feel safer than I've ever felt in my life.

As a dreamy smile curves my lips, I slowly open my eyes. Sunlight streams into the room through a wall of windows facing the lake. The water glistens under a vivid blue sky, not a cloud in sight.

Last night was out of this world. I'll never forget the things Gunner did to me with his mouth, his hands and his huge cock. He was wild and fierce, demanding and insatiable. I honestly didn't know I could have so many orgasms. It was phenomenal. *He* was phenomenal.

But now, in the sober light of day, I can't help wondering if I've made the biggest mistake of my life.

As I shift slightly under the covers, Gunner's arm tightens, pulling me closer. I snuggle into his muscled heat, sighing a little. I ache in places I've never ached before, places I never even knew existed. But I'm definitely not complaining.

Gazing out the window, I wait for Gunner to break the silence.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he finally murmurs.

“Only a penny? From a billionaire?” I *pfft* at him. “Cheap bastard.”

A deep rumble of laughter shakes his chest. “Jesus. Does that smart mouth ever rest?” With his arm still hooked around my waist, he rolls me over to face him.

I laugh, staring at him as he props himself up on his elbow. His eyes are slumberous, his jaw covered with dark stubble, his hair tousled and gorgeous. He looks so sexy my stomach flutters and my thighs clench.

“Good morning,” I half whisper.

“Mmm. A *very* good morning.” He smiles with lazy contentment. “How’re you feeling?”

“Tired.” I grin. “And kinda hungry.”

His eyes gleam. “We worked up one hell of an appetite, didn’t we?”

I blush. “You could say that.”

He threads his fingers through my hair, stroking it back off my face as his eyes probe mine. “Any regrets?”

I hesitate a moment, then shake my head.

“Don’t lie to me.” His thumb smooths away the furrow between my eyebrows. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I hesitate again before admitting, “I don’t know how this is going to work. I mean, you’re my boss, Gunner. Sleeping together is going to complicate everything.”

He nods very slowly. “It might.”

“*Might?*”

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to.”

“How could it not?”

“If we set boundaries—”

“How?” I exclaim. “How can we set boundaries when we’ve already crossed the biggest one of—”

He silences me with a kiss, pressing me back against the pillows. I arch into him as he slowly rims my lips with his tongue, staring into my eyes. When he sucks my bottom lip between his teeth and bites down, I can’t help moaning.

He kisses me until I’m breathless, until all my resistance has melted away. Softly nuzzling my jaw, he draws my leg over his thigh, causing the tips of my breasts to brush his hard chest. Tingles shoot through my body like heat lightning, bringing a warm flush to every inch of my skin.

He gazes down at me, tracing my swollen lips with the pad of his thumb. “Do you like it here?”

I blink dazedly. “What?”

“Do you like living here?”

I nod.

“Say it.”

“I like living here.”

He looks pleased.

“But I miss Sansa,” I add with a wistful smile.

His brow furrows in confusion. “From *Game of Thrones*?”

“No.” I laugh. “Well, yeah, I *do* miss that character. But I was talking about my cat.”

His eyes narrow. “You have a cat?”

I nod. “She was a stray who welcomed me to the neighborhood when I first moved to Texas. She’s an orange calico and a total badass—a survivor like Sansa from *Game of Thrones*. That’s who she’s named after.”

Gunner smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Where is she?”

“Back at the apartment with my friend who took over my lease. Mrs. Calder told me you don’t allow pets, especially cats.” I search his face. “Do you have something against cats?”

A muscle jumps in his jaw. "I'm not crazy about them."

"Why not?"

A strange expression flickers over his features before they harden. "I'm just not."

My heart sinks. So much for hoping he'd let Sansa join me.

He watches my face. "Now you're mad at me."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you—" He's interrupted by a firm knock at the door.

I stare at him, panicking at the thought of getting caught in his bed.

Clenching his jaw, he calls out tersely, "What is it?"

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," Mr. Leland speaks through the door. "I wanted to inform you that your mother is here."

I bolt upright, clutching the sheet to my breasts.

"My mother?" Gunner repeats in disbelief.

"Yes, sir," the butler confirms. "She flew in from Dallas this morning. I'm surprised you didn't hear her helicopter land."

Gunner frowns at me, his eyes narrowing at my alarmed expression. I swear I'll die of embarrassment if his mother catches us in bed together.

He looks toward the door. "Where is she?"

"The sitting room, sir. Mrs. Calder served her tea."

"Fine." Gunner's jaw is tight. "I'll be down shortly."

"Very good, sir."

After the butler leaves, Gunner meets my panic-stricken gaze. "Relax."

"*Relax?* Your mother is here!" My voice is high-pitched. "Were you expecting her?"

"No," he grits out. "I wasn't."

I get the impression he's not happy about this surprise visit. That makes two of us.

I scramble out of bed and start searching for my nightshirt while he watches me, his eyes roaming shamelessly over my naked body.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he murmurs.

His words heat my skin, but I'm too frazzled to savor the compliment. Locating my nightshirt, I hastily pull it over my head and comb my fingers through my tangled hair. "I knew I should've gone back to my room last night."

"What makes you think I would've let you go?" Gunner drawls.

I stare at him as he climbs out of bed and prowls toward me, his heavy cock swinging against his thighs.

I swallow hard and jerk my eyes up to his face. "W-What're you doing?"

He cups my cheek in his palm. "I'm going to take a shower and then head downstairs to greet my mother. Why don't you join me?"

"Where?" I croak.

"In the shower."

"Seriously? With your mom here?" I shake my head. "No way."

His eyes glimmer as he watches me retreat. "I'll see you downstairs."

I open the door, look both ways and then dash out, making it back to my room without running into anyone.

It's my day off, so I'm not required to show my face. But I don't want to risk offending Gunner's mother by hiding out in my room. Plus I'm insanely curious about the woman who brought him into the world. So I take a quick shower, get dressed and make my way downstairs.

I reach the landing just as Gunner disappears into the sitting room. I hurry after him, stopping near the doorway and

peeking around the corner as he walks toward a striking older blonde seated on the couch.

“Mother.” He bends to kiss her upturned cheek. “Nice to see you.”

“Likewise, darling.” She pats his face with an elegantly manicured hand. “Mrs. Calder says you were still in bed. It’s so unlike you to sleep in.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“And? You never sleep past six, even on Sundays.”

“Guess there’s a first time for everything.” Gunner looks around suspiciously. “Where’s that demonic furball?”

His mother sighs long-sufferingly. “If you mean Charlotte Brontë, she’s off somewhere exploring your castle.”

Charlotte Brontë? I mouth quizzically.

Gunner scowls at his mother. “She’d better not piss anywhere.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s been housetrained for years.” She pats the spot next to her on the couch. “Sit down, darling. You know how I hate it when you loom over me. You and Maverick have gotten so tall, I get a crick in my neck looking up at you.”

Gunner sits down obligingly. “So what brings you to town?”

“I wanted to see you, of course. It’s been too long.”

“You just saw me at Granddad’s birthday party two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks can feel like a lifetime at my age. Not that I’m old, mind you.”

“I wouldn’t dare suggest otherwise,” Gunner drawls.

His mother makes a tittering sound and picks up her teacup. With her perfectly coiffed blond hair and big blue eyes, she looks like a former Southern beauty queen straight

out of central casting. Her immaculate designer outfit makes me feel slovenly in the T-shirt and jeans that I threw on.

I'm tempted to run back upstairs to change my clothes. Before I can move, Gunner's mother suddenly glances across the room and sees me. She looks surprised, then suspicious.

"Why, darling," she says to Gunner, "I didn't know you had company."

Heat warms my face as Gunner rises from the couch and beckons me forward. I hesitate, wiping damp palms on my jeans before entering the room.

"Mom, I'd like you to meet Marlowe Somerset, my new housekeeper. Marlowe, this is my mother, Tabitha Billingsley."

I force myself to relax and smile. "Pleased to meet you."

She gives me a slow, critical perusal and says to Gunner, "You didn't tell me you hired a new maid. What happened to the last one? Sara—no, Brynn. Where'd she go?"

"It didn't work out," he says tersely.

"What a shame. Good help is so hard to find." His mother taps her fingernails against her teacup as she stares me down. "How old are you?"

I glance at Gunner before answering, "Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three?" She raises an eyebrow at Gunner. "They're getting younger and younger, aren't they?"

A muscle tightens in his jaw. There's an undercurrent of tension between mother and son. I don't know the source of it, but it's palpable enough to make me uncomfortable.

Ms. Billingsley returns her attention to me. "So what's your story, Cinderella?"

"Don't call her that," Gunner growls. "Her name is Marlowe. Address her with respect or don't address her at all."

His mother seems taken aback by the rebuke. She looks from me to Gunner, her eyes hardening with comprehension.

“Sleeping with the help, darling?” she jeers, lip curled scornfully. “Like father, like son.”

Gunner’s jaw clenches and he flicks a glance at me. I can’t read the emotion in his eyes. Anger? Guilt? Shame?

I paste on a polite smile, cheeks burning with humiliation. “It was nice meeting you, Ms. Billingsley. If you’ll excuse me, I have things to do.”

She smirks as I turn and walk out of the room.

Gunner comes after me. “Marlowe, wait.”

I walk faster. Just before I reach the staircase, he grabs my wrist and pulls me around to face him.

I heave a trembling breath. “Let me g—”

He takes my face in his hands. “I’m sorry about my mother. She had no right to speak to you that way.”

“It’s fine,” I say bitterly. “I *am* just the help.”

His expression turns thunderous. “You’re not the help.”

I snort. “I’m literally—”

“*YOU’RE NOT THE FUCKING HELP!*”

Startled by his angry outburst, I clamp my lips together and cross my arms under my breasts. My heart is thumping furiously and my legs are shaking. Worse, my eyes are stinging with tears.

“Shit. I’m sorry.” His expression softens and his fingers caress my cheek. “I didn’t mean to yell at you. I’m just ... *Fuck.*”

I stare into his stormy eyes. He looks so tortured, so conflicted, that I can’t help feeling sorry for him. But I feel even sorer for myself. Especially my heart, which is in serious danger of getting massacred by Cupid’s arrow.

What did his mother mean by “They’re getting younger and younger”? Does Gunner make a habit of sleeping with his employees? Did he screw his last housekeeper? Am I just another notch on his luxurious bedpost?

Pulling away from his hands, I inhale a shaky breath and lick my lips. “I have to go.”

Something like panic flares in his eyes. “You can’t quit.”

“I’m not quitting. I’m going out.”

Stark relief washes over his face, warming my insides. The feeling doesn’t last.

“Where are you going?”

I bristle at his possessive tone. “It’s my day off. I have plans.”

“What plans?”

“None of your business.”

His jaw clenches. “You’re not taking the car unless you tell me where you’re going.”

My temper flares. “I don’t need the damn car.”

Suspicion narrows his eyes. “Is someone picking you up?”

“Yes,” I hiss.

“Who?”

“If you must know, I’m having lunch with Dawson.”

Gunner’s face hardens. “Over my dead body.”

My mouth falls open. *Seriously, dude?*

“Let’s get something straight right now,” I say heatedly. “You might be my employer, but you’re not the boss of me!”

The words sound idiotic even to my own ears, but I’m too incensed to care.

“After last night,” he snarls, “how can you even consider going out with that guy?”

“For your information, we rescheduled our date after *you* forced me to cancel on him last week.”

“Cancel again.”

I jut my chin up. “No.”

He looks furious. “Dammit, Marlowe—”

“Just because we slept together doesn’t mean you own me. I’m not yours, Gunner. I never will be.”

“Stop lying to yourself,” he growls.

“I’m not!”

He leans in until his nose almost touches mine. “You can’t run from this,” he says very softly, his breath caressing my lips. “What happened between us last night wasn’t a fluke or a mistake. You wanted me just as much as I wanted you. We fucking connected, sweetheart. We haven’t *stopped* connecting since we first laid eyes on each other. Whether you believe it or not, we’re going to make love again. And again. And again. It’s not a matter of if, but when.”

I swallow thickly, quivering so hard my knees knock together. “Let me go, Mr. Ransom.”

“So it’s Mr. Ransom now?” he taunts.

I shove his chest with both hands and he steps back, his eyes skimming over my body, marking me as his.

“You don’t want Dawson,” he says in a low voice. “You didn’t want him the night we met, and you sure as hell don’t want him now. The sooner you stop wasting your time and his, the better off you’ll be.”

Having absolutely no comeback, I stomp past him, and this time he lets me go.

Chapter Fifteen



GUNNER

I STALK BACK INTO THE SITTING room, fists knotted at my sides.

My mother's face is the picture of innocence. "Was it something I said?"

"Cut the bullshit," I snarl. "You were way out of line."

"I'm out of line? *You're* the one sleeping with your maid!"

"That's none of your fucking business!"

She recoils in shock, staring up at me as if she's never seen me before. "What on earth has gotten into you?"

Clenching my jaw, I drop heavily into an armchair and rake both hands through my hair.

My mother studies me, her eyes narrowed and assessing.

"What?" I bite out.

"When you were growing up, it always bothered you that I called our servants the help. But that's what they were, darling. Hired workers are the help, and I'm sorry if that offends your virtuous sensibilities."

I frown at her. "What's your point?"

"I couldn't help overhearing your argument with your maid. You told her, rather vociferously, that she's not the help." An elegant eyebrow arches at me. "If she's not the help, what *is* she to you?"

I glare at her without responding.

“Dear heavens,” she says with a look of scandalized dismay. “Don’t tell me you’re becoming infatuated with that little girl?”

Something snags in my chest. Something jagged and raw that I’d rather not explore. “Stay out of this.”

Mom lets out a caustic laugh and shakes her head at me. “Oh, dear. Falling for an employee? How very Ransom of you.”

Even before the divorce, she turned Dad’s last name into a slur. Every bad thing Maverick and I did was blamed on our “wretched” Ransom blood.

“If your father—”

“Don’t start,” I growl warningly. “Don’t fucking start.”

She huffs indignantly. “You’re behaving like an absolute barbarian this morning. Maybe I should go stay with your brother.”

“No one’s stopping you. There’s the door.”

A look of hurt blooms in her eyes. Even though I know I’m being manipulated, guilt makes me relent after a few moments.

“You don’t have to leave,” I grumble darkly.

She sniffs. “I won’t stay where I’m not wanted.”

“Did I say you weren’t wanted?” I growl in exasperation. “Enough with the dramatics.”

She makes a simpering little noise. “You know I prefer staying here when I’m in town. Maverick has a fabulous home, but he’s a terrible host.”

“His guests would beg to differ,” I say wryly.

“The opinion of gold-digging sluts doesn’t count.” Mom settles back on the couch, picks up her teacup and takes a delicate sip. “I hear your dinner party was a smashing success. The society pages are all abuzz.”

I grunt, keeping my ears peeled for the sound of Marlowe's footsteps. Watching her leave for a date might send me into a blind rage, but I won't be able to stop myself from watching anyway.

"I see that Laurene was in attendance."

I give my mother a narrow look. "Who told you that?"

"Her picture was in all the articles, of course. The two of you looked splendid together." Mom contemplates me over the lip of her teacup. "Dare I hope that you're closer to resolving your differences with her?"

"I wouldn't say that." I lean back in the chair, stretching one leg out in front of me. "For the record, she invited herself to the party. I didn't know she was coming until she showed up."

Mom frowns at me. "I don't understand your reluctance to give her another chance. You know she loves you and clearly regrets breaking up with you."

"So now we get to the *real* reason for your visit." I glare at my mother. "Did Laurene put you up to this?"

"Of course not," she huffs, setting her teacup down on its saucer with an icy clink. "I'm not trying to meddle in your affairs—"

"Bullshit. That's exactly what you're doing."

Her mouth tightens reproachfully. "I just want to make you see reason. You and Laurene are the perfect match, and you need to realize that before it's too late. A woman like her won't be available forever."

I say nothing, agitatedly drumming my fingers on the arm of the chair. Contrary to popular belief, I really did try to make things work with Laurene. From the very beginning, I strove to be a good boyfriend. I scheduled weekly dates with her, took her to the finest restaurants, escorted her to lavish social events. Whenever I had to cancel a date, I made it up to her by buying her an expensive trinket—her favorite type of gift.

I did my best to show my commitment to her. If I'm being completely honest, I wanted to prove to myself that I could have a normal, healthy relationship with a woman. I wanted to prove that I was nothing like my father. But the ugly, bitter truth is that we're more alike than we're different.

Which is exactly why I should stay far, far away from Marlowe. I don't want to hurt her, but it seems inevitable in the long run.

Mom heaves a frustrated sigh. "You could have been marrying a hotel heiress this summer. Instead you'd rather play house with your scullery maid."

My patience snaps.

"Not another word," I snarl at her. "Not. Another. Fucking. Word."

Her eyes widen indignantly, but she wisely shuts up.

Just then I hear the click of heels in the foyer. When the front door slams, I get up and stalk over to the window.

Marlowe and her date are walking toward a shiny Beemer parked in front of the house. She's smiling at the prick, her glossy dark hair swinging against her back. She has on a red halter top, cutoff denim shorts and strappy sandals that make her tanned legs look longer.

A wave of savage possessiveness washes over me. I'm gritting my teeth so hard my jaw aches.

My mother joins me at the window. "Well, well, well. Looks like someone has a hot date."

My chest tightens as I watch Dawson open the passenger door for Marlowe. He waits for her to climb in, leering at her legs as she smiles up at him.

"What a lovely couple they make," Mom coos in delight.

I feel like my guts are being ripped out as the Beemer pulls away.

"And off they go," Mom singsongs before turning from the window and patting my cheek. "Cheer up, dear. You can't win

them all.”

Ignoring my sullen glare, she returns to the couch and pours herself more tea with a self-satisfied smile.

Just when my mood can't get any worse, her cat comes prancing into the room. Suddenly she stops and stares at me, back arched, hackles raised. As if *I'm* trespassing on *her* territory.

I scowl at her.

She hisses.

To be clear, I've never harmed a single hair on any feline's head. But this furry fucker tests the limits of my humanity.

“Aww, poor baby,” Mom coos sympathetically. “Come here, darling.”

She's talking to the cat. Not me—her son who's clearly in distress after Marlowe's departure.

Keeping a watchful eye on me, Charlotte Brontë slowly creeps her way over to the couch.

Mom picks her up and places her in her lap, stroking her fur as she croons soothingly, “Don't mind Gunner. He's just trying to cope with the shock of being rejected by a woman. It's never happened before, and I'm afraid he's not handling it very well.”

The cat meows and Mom cackles like a witch.

I send them both a death glare before stalking out of the room.

Chapter Sixteen



MARLOWE

“SO AFTER GRADUATING SUMMA CUM LAUDE,” Dawson drones on, “I was recruited by Deloitte. I had several other companies competing for me, of course, but Deloitte made the best offer. I was there for only a year before I got a big promotion to financial advisory analyst.”

“Really?” I widen my eyes, trying to look engrossed. “That’s so impressive.”

He chuckles with sham sheepishness. “You probably already heard all these things from Barbara.”

I smile brightly. “It never hurts to hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

Or the horse’s ass, in this case.

The uncharitable thought makes me feel guilty, but it’s true. Dawson is a self-absorbed douchebag, and that’s putting it mildly. We’re halfway through lunch, and all he’s talked about is himself: his fabulous downtown loft, his expensive car, his amazing job and cha-ching salary (yes, he actually made a *cha-ching* cash register sound). I’ve lost count of how many sentences he’s started with “I.” The man is clearly his own favorite subject.

The only consolation, I guess, is that he’s attractive. He has dark brown hair, grayish green eyes and perfect white teeth. His lean build reminds me of a swimmer. He told me he’s six foot two, but I suspect that’s a bit of an exaggeration. Gunner

is six-four and he towers over me, even in my heels. Dawson doesn't come close.

Annnd there I go again thinking about Gunner. I can't seem to stop myself. I keep seeing his face and the way he'd looked me up and down, all smoldering rage and possessiveness. His words echo through my mind, taunting me with their truth. *What happened between us last night wasn't a fluke or a mistake ... We haven't stopped connecting since we first laid eyes on each other. Whether you believe it or not, we're going to make love again. And again. And—*

“Marlowe?”

I blink stupidly at Dawson. “Sorry. What'd you say?”

“I asked if you want another drink. Your glass is empty.”

I glance down to see that I've drained the last icy dregs of my margarita, but I'm still holding the glass to my mouth.

Dawson signals our waiter for another margarita and smiles at me.

I smile back awkwardly and put my glass down, resisting the urge to drum my fingernails on the table.

We're sitting on the patio of a funky little Mexican restaurant that started out as a food truck. It's pretty crowded, even on a Sunday morning. Bouncy salsa music blends with conversation and laughter from other tables. No one else seems to be suffering through an excruciatingly boring date, which makes me jealous as hell.

The sad irony is that I didn't even remember the date until Dawson called this morning to ask if he could pick me up a little earlier. I wish I'd backed out at that point. I should have.

Dawson gestures to my empty plate. “How were your carne asada tacos?”

“Delicious. I really enjoyed them.”

“I could tell,” he says a bit snidely. “You practically inhaled them.”

I flush self-consciously before forcing a small laugh. “Guess I was pretty hungry.”

He nods, a slight smirk on his lips. “Your housekeeping duties must take a lot of energy.”

So does fucking my boss all night. The dirty thought makes me blush and grin to myself.

Our waiter brings my margarita, collects our empty plates and asks if we want dessert. Before I can say “Hell no, check please,” Dawson orders *tres leches* cake for both of us.

He smiles at me as the waiter walks away. “You’re gonna love it. It’s really good and totally worth the calories.”

I smile weakly. So much for my great escape.

“So you’re in grad school, right? At UT?”

I nod and take a sip of my fresh margarita.

“When do classes start?”

“Next Tuesday.”

“How many classes are you taking?”

“Three. I’ll have Fridays off.”

Dawson grins. “Are you excited?”

“Very.” It’s the most interest he’s shown in me since our date started. Maybe there’s hope after all.

“Barbara says you’re enrolled in the ... wait, don’t tell me.” He scrunches up his face in concentration, then snaps his fingers. “School of Information. The iSchool. You’re studying to become a librarian.”

I smile. “That’s right.”

He grins, obviously pleased with himself for remembering. I wait for him to ask me more questions about school, work, family—*anything*.

“Did you know that your boss is one of UT’s biggest alumni donors?” he says.

I deflate in my seat.

“I read in *Forbes* that he’s donated over \$250 million to the university, including sixty mil from his foundation’s Global Information Security Fellowship.” Dawson grins. “I fully expect UT to name a building after him any day now.”

“The school already has a Ransom building,” I murmur. “But sure, why not?”

Dawson hesitates, clearly wanting to say more. “I’d love to meet him. Maybe you could introduce us when I drop you off.”

Any last shred of hope I had collapses like a soufflé. Apparently Gunner was right about Dawson’s true motives for setting up this date. It galls me to admit it, but here we are.

Dawson leans toward me with a hopeful expression. “So what do you say? Can you introduce me to your boss, maybe put in a good—”

“He won’t be home,” I lie.

Dawson frowns. “He won’t?”

“No. He plays golf on Sundays”—*every other Sunday*—“and gets back pretty late.”

“Oh.” Dawson looks disappointed. Crushed, even.

Pushed to my limit, I shake my head at him. “Did you ask me out because I work for Gunner Ransom?”

His face registers shock, then guilt. “Of course not! Why would you say that?”

I narrow my eyes. “You’ve shown more interest in my boss than me.”

“That’s not true!”

“Sure looks that way from where I’m sitting.”

He stares at me, his mouth flapping open and closed. He obviously wasn’t expecting to be called out.

I calmly sip my margarita, waiting for him to scrape together some bullshit response.

“Look, I won’t lie to you,” he finally says. “I’m a huge fan of your boss. I’ve followed his career since his company went public and shook up the whole stock market. As much as I love my job, I’d jump at the chance to work for Gunner. He has a brilliant mind and killer business instincts. I didn’t think it’d be a big deal to ask you for an introduction. But that’s not the only reason I wanted to go out with you,” he hastens to add. “I think you’re really smart and pretty. Even though I generally prefer skinny blondes, I’d like to get to know you better.”

Feeling more than a tad insulted, I paste on a saccharine smile and say, “If you really want to get to know someone, you might want to spend a little less time talking about yourself. It makes you look and sound like an egotistical douchebag.” Seeing his mouth tighten, I add sweetly, “Just something to keep in mind for your next date. Which, I’m afraid, won’t be with me.”

An angry flush crawls up his neck and over his face.

When our waiter returns with dessert, Dawson asks for separate checks. His snippy tone raises the waiter’s eyebrow.

“No need for separate checks. Lunch is on me.” As Dawson’s jaw clenches, I sample a forkful of cake and hum my appreciation. “Wow. That *is* good.” I grin at the waiter. “I’ll take another piece to go.”

He grins back and promises to return with the check.

When we’re alone again, Dawson gives me the sullen look of a man who’s feeling emasculated. “You don’t have to pay for my lunch.”

“I don’t mind. It’s not like I can’t afford it.”

“Can you?” He smirks condescendingly. “You’re a housekeeper.”

“A well-paid one.” I lower my voice as if confiding a secret. “Not to brag, but I make even more than you.”

He scoffs. “I seriously doubt it.”

“Oh, but it’s true. Mr. Ransom is an incredibly generous employer. Honestly, I think the only thing he loves more than making money is giving it away. No wonder you’re dying to work for him.” I wink. “If you ever get a chance, you should *totally* jump on it.”

Dawson glares at me for a moment, then looks down at his untouched cake and scowls.

It’s all I can do not to laugh.

WHEN I GET HOME, MRS. CALDER is in the kitchen stirring a pitcher of her addictive lemonade.

She looks surprised to see me. “Back already?”

I shrug. “We ate fast.”

She lifts both eyebrows. “Did you at least have a good time?”

“Sure.” I smile and hold up my to-go box. “I brought you some dessert. *Tres leches* cake.”

“Oh, how lovely. Thank you, dear.” She beams at me. “Stick it in the fridge so I can enjoy it later.”

I cross the room to do as she asks. “Is Ms. Billingsley still here?”

“No, dear. She went to stay with Maverick.”

“Oh.” I can barely hide my relief.

Mrs. Calder’s eyes twinkle knowingly. I’m sure she’s well aware that our employer’s mother is kind of a bitch.

I mosey over to the center island, hands tucked in my back pockets. “So, um, where’s Mr. Ransom?”

“Down at the dock sanding one of his boats.”

I stare at her in surprise. “He doesn’t pay someone to do that? He ... does it himself?”

She smiles at my reaction. “He enjoys working with his hands. When he and Maverick were kids, their father taught them how to change a tire, pump gas, jumpstart the engine and identify all the parts under the hood. Dale said he’d be damned

if he raised pampered rich boys with butter-soft hands and shiny nails.” She chuckles, dumping ice cubes into the pitcher.

When drops of lemonade splash the marble counter, I automatically grab a dishrag to wipe up the spill.

“Gunner likes to tackle tough projects when he has something heavy on his mind.” Mrs. Calder slants me a probing look. “Any idea what that might be?”

I swallow hard and shake my head.

She purses her lips, and I can tell she doesn’t believe me.

I start backing away. “Well, uh—”

“Hang on.” She adds a few lemon slices to the pitcher, smiling reminiscently as she says, “Gunner and Maverick couldn’t get enough of my homemade lemonade when they were growing up. I used to whip up a batch while they were playing outside. As soon as it was ready, they’d come running into the house, faces streaked with dirt and hair sticking up every which way. Before I could tell them to go wash their hands, they were chugging down my lemonade and clamoring for more. Sunshine in a glass, that’s what Gunner called it.” She pours a tall serving and hands it to me. “Here, take this down to him.”

I balk. “Um ...”

She arches an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

“No, ma’am.” As I scurry from the kitchen, I swear I hear her laughing at me.

I leave the house and make my way across the expansive lawn leading down to the lake. The sun is warm, beating down on my head. But the beads of sweat gathering between my breasts have more to do with anxiety than the summer heat.

My nerves intensify as I approach the boathouse and dock. I hear loud rock music and the whirring roar of a power tool before I come upon my boss.

He’s on his knees sanding the hull of a sailboat mounted on a platform. He’s wearing gray athletic shorts and an orange Longhorns T-shirt molded to his chest and upper arms,

outlining hard muscles. He has on a protective face shield, heavy leather construction gloves and scuffed work boots.

I've never seen him like this before. It's such a stark departure from the urbane, bespoke-suit-wearing CEO that I'm used to. Unfortunately for me, the handyman version is just as droolworthy as his other persona.

Between the electric sander and blaring music, I know he won't hear me if I speak. So I take a deep breath and nervously step into his line of sight.

He glances up from the boat, his gaze locking on me.

My mouth goes as dry as the Serengeti.

"Hey," I croak.

His eyes narrow behind the face shield, and for one awful second I think he's going to tell me to get lost. But then he turns off the sander, flips his mask up and grabs his phone to mute the music blasting from hidden speakers.

I hold up the sweating glass of lemonade. "Mrs. Calder asked me to bring this to you. She thought you could use a little sunshine."

He looks at the glass, his face softening ever so slightly before he grunts, "I have water."

"She insisted." I give him a desperate look. "Please don't send me back there with an untouched drink. She won't be pleased, and you know how terrifying she can be."

I detect a smile twitching at his mouth. But then he jerks his chin toward a wooden table and says gruffly, "Leave it over there."

"You should drink it before it gets warm."

He stares at me a few seconds longer. Then he pulls off his mask and gloves, tosses them down and stretches to his feet.

My breathing becomes shallow as he saunters over to me and takes the lemonade, his callused fingers brushing mine.

I bite my lip as he tips his head back to drain the glass. Watching his strong throat muscles work sends heat curling

low in my belly. He smells like sweat, dust and hardworking man. Totally delicious.

He hands the empty glass back to me. “Thanks.”

I swallow hard and nod.

His body heat invades my personal space as he stands in front of me. His black hair is dusty and ruffled, his jaw bristly with stubble. I can see his muscled pecs straining against the worn fabric of his T-shirt. The color has faded and the white longhorn logo is chipped.

Feeling more than a little intoxicated, I glance away from him, staring at the boathouse and then at the gleaming white yacht moored in the slip. *Hook 'em Horns* is painted on the stern in flowing black letters, and water laps gently against the bottom. It's the only sound between us until Gunner finally speaks, his voice low and cool.

“How was your date?”

I turn back to him, smiling brightly. “It was great. We had fun.” I refuse to give him the satisfaction of knowing that my date was an unmitigated disaster.

“You weren't gone very long,” he observes.

“Dawson had previous dinner plans with his parents. That's why we met for lunch instead.” That part, at least, is true.

Gunner studies my face, his eyes narrowed and intense. It takes everything I have not to squirm like a guilty teenager caught breaking curfew.

“Are you going out with him again?”

“Maybe,” I lie.

His jaw tenses.

“Probably not,” I whisper.

Something flickers in his eyes, and I can't tell if it's relief or triumph. Probably the latter.

As my boss, he has the upper hand in our relationship. But I wonder if he knows just how much power he holds over me. I wonder if he knows that I shiver every time he laughs. When he smiles, I melt. When he calls me kitten, I want to curl up in his lap.

I wonder if he knows how hard I'm trying not to fall for him.

He's still looking at me, his eyes boring into mine as if he's waiting for something. Did he ask me a question that I missed?

“Sorry. I—”

“Was there something else you wanted?” He sounds impatient now.

I hesitate, watching as a warm breeze blows a lock of hair across his forehead. My fingers itch to stroke it back. Under different circumstances, I might have.

“Thanks for the lemonade.” Abruptly he turns and walks away, the hard muscles of his ass flexing beneath his shorts.

I lick my dry lips. “Guess I'll, um, let you get back to work.”

He's already cranking the music back up, dismissing me.

Chapter Seventeen



MARLOWE

SHORTLY AFTER SIX, HE LEAVES TO have dinner with his mother and brother.

I share a quiet meal with Mrs. Calder, then head up to my room and crack open a textbook. Last month I started reading books assigned by my professors to get a jumpstart on grad school.

Curled up in my desk chair, I try to finish the chapter I started yesterday. But I can't concentrate. The words on the page keep blurring together as thoughts of Gunner infest my brain.

Finally I give up, snap the book closed and turn on the TV. I surf channels until I find a suspense thriller on HBO Max. I half watch the movie, keeping my ears trained for the sound of Gunner returning home.

Around ten o'clock, I hear the low rumble of his voice downstairs. Every nerve ending in my body sparks to life, propelling me to my feet. I hurry across the room and press my ear to the door, listening as Gunner talks to Mr. Leland. I'm too far away to make out their words until I hear him tell the butler goodnight.

Heart racing like a bullet, I lean back against the door and close my eyes.

I don't want to spend the night apart from Gunner. I have to go to him, make things right between us. And I know a

good way to start.

Before I lose my courage and talk myself out of it, I strip naked and slip into a short satin robe. Leaving my hair loose around my shoulders, I take a deep breath and then make my way through the silent house to the south wing.

I reach Gunner's master suite and pause at the double doors, listening for any sound from within. Hearing nothing, I slowly turn the knob and enter. Both the bedroom and sitting room are empty.

Following the sound of running water, I pad across the enormous suite to reach a set of French doors that open to the master bathroom.

Gunner is in there. Showering. Naked. Wet. Hot. Pissed off.

As my pulse kicks up another notch, I silently count to ten and then slip inside the luxurious room.

My breath catches sharply when I see him.

He's standing in the huge black marble shower with a dozen rainfall shower heads and multiple jets. His face is lifted to the hot spray and his eyes are closed, water sluicing down his muscled body.

My nipples tighten as I stare at his bulging biceps and wide shoulders, his V-shaped torso arrowing down to that amazing ass. His cock hangs heavy between his powerful thighs, heating my core with scorchingly explicit memories of our lovemaking.

As if sensing my hungry appraisal, he opens his eyes and turns his head. When he sees me standing there, he goes completely still, staring at me through the swirling steam.

Without breaking eye contact, I slide my robe off my shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

Gunner's eyes blaze a path over my breasts and my stomach before settling on my triangle of dark curls. The hunger in his gaze is unmistakable. But he doesn't say a word,

just watches me open the glass door and step inside the steamy enclosure that could easily fit a whole football team.

The falling water tingles as it hits my aroused body. I move silently toward Gunner and curl my arms around his neck, pressing my naked breasts against his chest. I feel him shiver, his cock twitching against my belly.

“Marlowe.” His voice is a dark rumble, breath raspy. “What’re you doing?”

“What do you think?” I catch his full bottom lip between my teeth, tugging softly and then dipping my tongue into his mouth for a slow, sensual kiss.

“You’re playing with fire,” he warns.

“Too late. I’m already burning.” Staring into his eyes, I slowly sink to my knees in front of him.

He watches intently as I slide my hand down his lickable abs, trailing my fingers over the ripped muscles. His beautiful cock rises before my eyes, stretching and swelling to its very impressive size.

He sucks in a harsh breath when I wrap my fingers around him, circling the broad head with my thumb. My hand looks so tiny against his straining thickness. It’s both fascinating and arousing.

I tilt my head to look up at him, watching as he slicks back his wet black hair, his chest rising and falling with his jagged breathing. He’s so sexy I almost can’t take it.

Keeping my eyes on his gorgeous face, I tighten my hand around the base of his cock just before my mouth covers the tip.

“Fuck,” he hisses, spearing his fingers into my hair.

“You like that?” I whisper seductively.

“Hell, yes.” His voice is a tight rasp that makes me feel gloriously empowered. He’s under my control for once, mine to do with as I please.

I circle him with my tongue, exhilarated by the way his thighs clench before he locks his knees, bracing himself. His lashes are lowered to watch me, stormy blue eyes blazing as I slide my mouth down his hard shaft, my lips stretched wide around his girth.

He groans hoarsely, his hand gripping my hair at the base of my skull. Reveling in his response, I cup his heavy balls, squeezing and stroking and rolling them against my palm.

He shudders and flexes his hips, pushing his big cock farther into my mouth. I moan around the luscious fullness, loving the pulse of his veins on my tongue. Cupping his ass with my other hand, I swallow more of him, deep-throating as much as I can without choking.

“Fuck, Marlowe.” His head falls back as he closes his eyes, his features strained.

I bob up and down his veiny length, my hand curled around the three or four inches I couldn't fit in my mouth. He groans my name again, his abs contracting as I hollow my cheeks to suck him harder. He swells even more, leaking salty precum onto my tongue. His pleasure, so raw and elemental, ramps up my need to an almost obscene level. Never have I enjoyed giving a blowjob so much.

“So good,” I moan, licking and circling his swollen head. “You're so damn big. I'm going to suck every last drop of cum out of you.”

“Goddamn, baby.” Fisting both hands in my hair, Gunner takes control and starts thrusting between my lips.

I moan my approval as he stares down at me, his eyes wild with savage lust. I know what an erotic vision I make on my knees before him, my lips wrapped around his cock as he fucks my wet mouth. I know he's fantasized about this exact scenario, because I've done the same thing.

“Fuck, Marlowe, the way you look right now,” he rasps darkly, confirming my thoughts. “Don't wake me if I'm dreaming.”

I smile and then moan as he slams his cock deeper, hitting the back of my throat. The look on his face is fierce and primal, heightening my arousal as my pussy throbs, my nails digging into his ass cheek.

“Yes,” I whimper breathlessly. “I want you, baby. Come for me.”

Clenching his jaw, he holds my head between his hands and gives one last deep thrust. His hips lock against my mouth before he jerks and groans helplessly, coming so hard I feel it down to the marrow of my bones.

Thick hot semen spills over my tongue, flooding my throat. I swallow greedily, loving the musky taste and texture of him as he shudders against me, eyes closed, chest heaving with ragged breaths. The pure ecstasy on his face thrills me to the core.

When I’ve sucked him dry as promised, he releases my hair and drags his cock out of my mouth. I lick my lips, gazing up at him until he pulls me to my feet and kisses me, his mouth a searing brand in the cascading water.

My pulse pounds as he slowly backs me up against the marble wall and hooks one of my legs over his elbow. Watching my face through the hot mist, he thumbs my aching clit and curls two fingers inside, fucking me with them before finding my G-spot.

That’s all it takes for me to break apart, sobbing his name.

He thrusts his fingers in and out of my slickness until the orgasmic spasms ebb away, leaving me limp and flushed. Then he drops his forehead to mine, our breaths mingling as steam swirls around us.

“You have an incredible, amazing mouth,” he rumbles, staring at my parted lips. “I could fuck it all night and still not get enough.”

“Oh my,” I breathe, my pussy rippling at his carnal words.

Drawing my leg around his hip, he grinds slowly against me, sliding his cock back and forth along my slit. He’s already

getting hard again, and the thought excites me like nothing else.

“Gunner,” I whisper. “I need you to fuck me. *Please.*”

Lifting his head, he pushes a button on the touchscreen interface on the wall. Across the room, the gargantuan soaking tub starts filling with water.

I grin up at him. “The marvels of modern technology.”

“Mmm.” He bends to nuzzle my neck, his hands hot and slick on my skin as he caresses my hips and thighs. I arch back with a moan when he cups my breasts, teasing my nipples with his teeth and tongue as tingles explode through my body.

When the tub is full, he turns off the water and takes my hand, tugging me out of the shower. As he steers me behind him—away from the tub—our dripping bodies track water across the marble floor that I mopped two days ago.

“Gunner—” I start, but he cuts me off with a look.

“You’re going to learn what happens when you make me jealous, Marlowe.” His voice is low and dangerous, sending a thrill of both anticipation and fear through me.

He leads me out of the bathroom and into the sprawling bedroom. Before I can draw my next breath, he tosses me down on the bed. I land with a bounce, my wet hair slapping my face.

Heart beating rabbit-fast, I watch as he crosses to the walk-in closet and disappears inside. Seconds later, he reemerges with a long blue vibrator and a leather paddle.

My eyes widen, a mix of excitement and nerves pulsing through my veins as he prowls toward me, his cock bobbing with every step.

I lick my suddenly dry lips. “W-What’re you—”

“You don’t get to torture me all day and then waltz back in here like nothing happened.” He climbs onto the bed like a stalking panther, his eyes dark with intent. “You need to be taught a lesson.”

My breath catches as a heady rush of excitement sweeps through me. “What, um, what kind of lesson?”

“The kind you won’t ever forget.” He crawls over my body and holds himself there with the hard imprint of his cock on my belly. I can’t resist reaching down to grasp it, giving him several long strokes as he watches me under his black lashes.

“How bad do you want me to fuck you?” he murmurs.

“Do you even have to ask?” I shamelessly grind myself against him. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Tell me,” he commands. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I want you to fuck me, Gunner. Want it so fucking bad.”

He pulls my hand off his cock and lowers his face until our mouths are almost touching, two water droplets dripping from his wet hair to fall on my lips.

“If you want me to fuck you,” he whispers silkily, “don’t come until I say so.”

Even in that moment, with every part of my body screaming to be penetrated, I feel my chin tilt up in defiance. “What if I come without your permission? How would you know without being inside me?”

His expression darkens as if he’s insulted. “You think I can’t tell when you come, Marlowe? You think I haven’t already memorized the way your eyes go all hazy before rolling back into your head? The way your nostrils flare and your teeth sink into your bottom lip? The way your stomach quivers and your thighs shake? You think those images haven’t been seared into my fucking brain? You actually *think* you can hide an orgasm from me?”

“G-Guess not,” I mumble.

His eyes drill into mine. “You don’t come until I say you can come,” he warns darkly. “Do you understand?”

I nod quickly, breathless and trembling.

He lifts away from me and sits back on his heels. Pulse hammering, I watch him pick up the vibrator and turn it on,

the low hum filling the room. He trails it lightly over my body, teasing my breasts, my stomach and my thighs, each pass making me squirm and gasp.

“Spread your legs a little more. That’s it.” He brushes the toy over my clit and I cry out, my hips bucking against the electric sensation.

His eyes darken with satisfaction. Slowly, deliberately, he circles the tip of the vibrator around my clit, never quite applying the pressure I need to find release. Before long I’m going wild, my breaths coming in short gasps, hands clutching the sheets beneath me.

“Please, Gunner,” I whimper, my body arching toward him, crazed for his touch. Hungry for his cock.

He leans down, his lips brushing my ear. “Not yet,” he rumbles, the words sending hot tingles down my spine. He slides the vibrator lower, teasing my entrance before moving back up to my hard clit, keeping me on the edge but never letting me fall over.

My frustration grows like a furnace being stoked, my body thrumming until I’m nearly climbing out of my skin. When I move to touch myself, Gunner seizes my wrists, pinning them above my head with one big hand. The ruthless dominance in his eyes makes my heart race even faster.

“Do I need to tie you down?” he growls.

“N-No.” I close my eyes, my breath hitching. “But I ... I don’t think—”

“Who fucking told you to think?”

I swallow a whimper, my toes curling.

He continues his torment, the vibrator buzzing against my dripping pussy in maddeningly light touches.

My hips twist against his hand, searching for the friction I so desperately crave. But he denies me, holding me firmly in place as my heart thunders in my ears, the tightness in my pussy and clit downright painful.

Just when I think I can't take another second without exploding, he flips me over on all fours. My sodden hair hangs over my face as I look back at him, watching as he drags the paddle across the swell of my ass. The leather is cool, a stark contrast to my heated skin. I instinctively tense up, anticipation heightening my senses.

The first strike is sharp, making me gasp.

He pauses to let me recover, demanding gruffly, "Are you okay?"

Some foolish spark of defiance makes me hiss, "That all you got?"

The punishment is swift, three hard smacks against my ass that have me arching and crying out, pain mingling with unexpected pleasure.

"Little brat. That smart mouth of yours will be your downfall." He delivers a series of firm, measured smacks, careful never to hit me in the same spot more than a few times.

I've never been spanked before, let alone with a paddle. The punishment leaves me panting and moaning, my skin burning with each impact. Tears sting my eyes, the ache in my core intensifying until wetness drips from my slick folds and my thighs burn like they're on fire.

By the time he stops, my ass is bright red and throbbing. But I'm way past the point of caring. I need release like never before, need him to send me crashing over the edge into pure sexual oblivion.

He flips me over again, his eyes glittering with feral triumph as he takes in my desperate, half-crazed state.

"See what happens when you play games with me?" he growls low.

"Yes," I whimper, hips writhing as I ogle his cock. It stands out from his body, straight as a spear and granite hard. I want him inside me with an intensity that's almost obscene. The man's got me feeling and acting like a dick-crazed little whore.

“Please, Gunner, I just need to—”

“Not yet,” he repeats, bringing the vibrator back to my clit.

He teases me relentlessly, luring me to the brink again and again, only to pull away at the last second. My hungry moans turn into mewling cries as the toy’s pulsating vibrations drive me closer and closer to that wondrous, dazzling edge. I’m a writhing hot mess, every cell in my body begging for sweet relief. But he keeps me there, teetering on the precipice of orgasm until I’m nearly delirious with need.

“Did he touch you?” he whispers against my panting mouth.

I stare up at him in dazed confusion. “Who?”

“Your fucking date. Did he touch you?” Gunner presses the vibrator harder against my clit, making me groan. “Did you let him kiss you?”

I shake my head quickly. “No—”

He turns the dial up a notch. “Don’t lie to me.”

“He didn’t kiss me, I swear!”

“Hmm.” Gunner eases just the tip of the vibrator inside me, watching my pussy suck at it, demanding the whole length. “Did you want him to kiss you?”

“No,” I gasp. “I don’t kiss on the first date.”

“You kissed me.”

My body flushes. “Only you, Gunner. Only you.”

His eyes darken, something like pleasure flickering through the molten blue depths before he murmurs, “Good girl.”

I half expect to be rewarded with a reprieve. But he continues torturing me, alternating between the vibrator and his skilled hands and mouth. He pinches my sore nipples, eliciting a wild cry before he soothes the sting with soft kisses. My skin burns from his fingers trailing a path down my stomach, leaving my muscles quivering.

When he finally slides a finger inside me, I scream with pleasure, my hips bucking against his hand. He rumbles his approval and adds a second finger, twisting and plunging until my walls clench in agony.

“Please, Gunner,” I cry, my voice breaking. “I can’t ... I can’t take it anymore!”

“You can and you will.” He pulls his soaked fingers out of me, ignoring my whimper of protest as he moves down, spreading my legs wider before he kisses my inner thighs. His breath is hot against my hypersensitive skin, the soft rasp of his beard stubble almost too much to bear.

I squirm beneath him as he licks and nibbles his way closer to my core, never quite touching me where I need it the most. My entire body is a live wire, every nerve ending screaming for release, my blood burning hotter with every agonizing second he denies me an orgasm.

Finally he presses his mouth to my needy pussy, running his tongue along my slit. My moan is loud and uninhibited, my fingers clawing through his wet hair to pull him even closer.

He sucks on my clit, his tongue swirling in torturous circles. The sensation is otherworldly, every curl and stroke sending jolts of ecstasy through my body.

My orgasm builds quickly, the pressure within me reaching fever pitch. Just as I’m about to tumble right over the edge, Gunner pulls away once again.

I let out a little scream of frustration, tears leaking down my temples. “No more ... please, Gunner, I need to come!”

His eyes gleam with wicked satisfaction. Slowly he moves back up my body, his hand trailing between my legs, broad fingers dipping inside me again. He pumps them slowly while his thumb brushes my overstimulated clit, keeping me painfully balanced on a knife’s edge.

“You will come when I say so,” he reminds me. “And *only* when I say so.”

I whimper as he leans down and kisses me, his tongue claiming my mouth with the same dominance he’s exerting

with his touch. I kiss him back desperately as my body arches into his, craving his heat, his control. His complete possession.

He pulls back, his cobalt eyes glittering with raw lust. “Now, Marlowe,” he growls. “*Now* I’m going to fuck you.”

I nearly wail with relief when he picks me up and carries me back into the bathroom, where he nimbly climbs into the massive tub and lowers us into the steaming water.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and straddle him, gasping at the blunt press of his cock at my opening. “Oh God. I’m not gonna make it.”

“Yes, you are,” he rumbles, firmly gripping my hips. “You’ve been such a good girl, Marlowe. Hold on a little longer. Go the distance with me.”

Sadist, I silently curse him as I rise up on my knees, reaching down to grasp his thick erection. Our eyes lock as he lowers me onto him, groaning with husky satisfaction.

Stretched to aching fullness, I can’t move for a moment, can only lean forward with my face pressed against his shoulder. Nothing has ever felt more perfect than the way this man stretches me. Fills me to overflowing.

Gripping my ass cheeks with both hands, he begins lifting me up and down his cock in a slow, mind-blowing rhythm. I’m swollen and sensitive from being tortured for so long. As a tremble racks my body like a foreshock, I clutch Gunner’s shoulders and close my eyes, moaning at the slick heat of him rubbing every nerve ending inside my pussy.

“Look at me,” he commands.

The moment I obey, the scorching need in his eyes nearly unravels me on the spot.

“Gunner.” My voice breaks on his name. “Please ... I can’t—”

“Shh ... just a little bit more.” He kisses my neck and jaw before his mouth covers mine, wet and hungry. I kiss him back, my nails digging into his shoulders as a tidal wave of erotic tension swells inside me. When he reaches between our

bodies to rub my engorged clit, the luscious friction makes me keen in ecstasy.

He thrusts up into me, taking complete control. He's not slow or gentle, and I don't want him to be. I want the brutal penetration as he slams himself inside me again and again, each stroke grinding my clit against his cock and sending shockwaves of pleasure zinging through me.

"So good, Marlowe. So fucking good." He sucks deeply on my breast, his tongue stroking the tight flesh of my nipple.

"Yes," I sob with need as my head falls back, damp hair tumbling to my ass. "Please, please, please, I can't—"

"Soon, angel." He pounds in and out of me, the hot water slapping against our bodies and sloshing over the tub's rim. I hold on tight, my breath fracturing into gasps as my pussy squeezes around his cock, milking him with every thrust. I'm so close to the edge, chasing exquisite relief.

"You're mine, Marlowe," he growls in my ear. "Your sweet pussy is mine, your sexy ass, your gorgeous tits, your smart fucking mouth. You belong to me, every fucking inch, and don't you ever forget it."

"I won't," I gasp, half delirious. "I promise."

"Good girl. I'm going to let you come now." The words are barely out of his mouth before I'm climaxing, screaming his name as my walls convulse around him. The pleasure is so intense, the relief so dizzying, I think I might pass out.

I'm still coming on his dick when he erupts with a guttural shout, pressing his mouth against my neck as he pumps hot ropes of cum deep inside me.

We remain like that for several minutes, panting and plastered wetly together. When he sinks his teeth into my skin, I shiver before dropping my head weakly onto his shoulder, completely drained.

After a few more minutes, I murmur contentedly, "We should fight more often. The makeup sex is outta this world."

Gunner's smoky chuckle is sex personified. "All we do is fight."

"Your fault."

He nips my shoulder in retaliation.

The quick sting makes me gasp and then moan as his soft lips dance over my skin, teasing and caressing.

I don't think I'll ever get enough of this man. And that's totally fine by me.

Chapter Eighteen



MARLOWE

AFTERWARD WE LAY WRAPPED UP IN a blanket on a big plush rug in his sitting room. The only light comes from the low fire crackling in the stone fireplace.

Gunner holds me in his arms, my head cradled against his warm chest. We're both quiet, listening to the soft strains of Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence*. I've never been with a man who shares my appreciation for classical music. But then, Gunner Ransom is no ordinary man. He's older, wiser and far more experienced than me. He's seen worlds and traveled to places I can only dream about. Being with him is thrilling. Intoxicating. Like nothing I've ever experienced before.

I just hope to God he won't break my heart.

"What're you thinking?" he murmurs into my hair.

"Not much," I say softly. "Just enjoying the music. Tchaikovsky is one of the first composers my father introduced me to."

"Yeah?" Gunner traces lazy circles on my hip. "What's your favorite piece?"

"Hmm. It's hard to say. I mean, the *1812 Overture* is his most famous work. And *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty* are his most popular ballets—all amazing, obviously. But if I had to pick a favorite piece, it would have to be the *Pathétique Symphony*. That's the song I performed at the spring concert during my senior year."

“I’m impressed,” Gunner says warmly. “*Pathétique* is considered one of the greatest symphonic masterpieces of all time.”

“I know,” I say with a quiet smile. “It was Tchaikovsky’s last work and such a powerful piece. I chose it because I wanted to challenge myself, the way my father would have if he were still alive. I was at a recital when he died, so performing in front of audiences has always been particularly emotional for me. During my performance at the spring concert, I imagined him up in heaven grinning and cheering me on.”

Gunner kisses the top of my head and hugs me closer, whispering against my hair, “I know you made him very proud.”

My heart expands at his words. “Thank you,” I whisper, nuzzling my face into the curve of his neck.

He strokes his hand up and down my back, a tender caress that leaves me tingling and warm. “I have season tickets for the Austin Symphony. Maybe I’ll take you to a concert this fall.”

My pulse leaps with excitement. “Like a date?”

“Like a date.” Amusement threads his voice. “Would that be okay with you?”

I smile against his skin. “I think I could manage.”

A low chuckle rumbles through his chest, deepening my smile.

I circle his flat nipple with my finger, fascinated by the tiny bumps on the outer edge. “Speaking of dates ... I lied to you.”

His hand stills on my back. “Lied about what?”

“My date with Dawson.” I bite my lower lip, feeling foolish. “I didn’t have a good time. It was horrible.”

“Horrible?”

“A disaster.”

“Damn,” Gunner drawls. “I’m real sorry to hear that.”

I tilt my head back to eye him suspiciously. “You don’t *look* sorry.”

“I am.” His grin belies his words as he shifts his head on the pillow to meet my gaze. “What happened?”

I scowl. “He was an asshole. Boring, shallow, conceited. When he wasn’t bragging about himself, he was fawning over you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, *you*.” I roll my eyes. “Apparently he’s your biggest fan. He was hoping I’d introduce him to you, the scheming prick.”

Gunner’s grin turns smug. “I hate to say I told you so—”

I poke him in the ribs, and he lets out a rumbling laugh that echoes around the room.

When I pull away in a snit, he hauls me back into his arms, imprisoning my body against his. I surrender with a dramatic huff, fighting a grin as my head resettles on his chest.

His fingers sink into my hair, gently kneading my scalp and sending a new flurry of tingles over my skin. “I’m sorry Dawson turned out to be a pathetic loser. Want me to kick his ass?”

“No,” I grumble. “He’s such a fanboy, he’d probably enjoy it.”

Gunner laughs, nuzzling my hair with his cheek as Chopin’s Nocturne in E-flat major starts playing.

I trace the ridges of muscle on his chest, working up the nerve to broach one of the topics that’s been on my mind since that morning. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.” He sounds wary.

“What happened with your previous housekeeper?”

I feel his body tense beneath me.

After a few seconds, he says tightly, “Why are you asking about her?”

“I’m just curious. You said it didn’t work out. I’d like to know why so I don’t repeat any of her mistakes,” I say half jokingly.

He’s not amused. “She didn’t have the right temperament for the job. So I fired her.”

“I see.” But I *don’t* see. Not without specific details, which he’s clearly unwilling to share. “Your mother said your housekeepers are getting younger and younger. How old was my predecessor?”

He hesitates. “Twenty-seven.”

I run a finger down his chest. “Was she pretty?”

“Dammit, Marlowe,” he growls in frustration. “I didn’t sleep with her, if that’s what you’re wondering. I told you last night that I don’t fool around with my employees, and I meant it. You’re the only exception I’ve ever made.”

His anger makes me feel guilty for doubting him. “I’m sorry. I just ... I guess I let your mother’s words get under my skin.”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” he says darkly. “She thrives on exploiting people’s fears and insecurities. It’s her lifeblood.”

I recognize the bitterness in his voice. It reminds me of my own tangled feelings toward my mother. “Is that why you two aren’t close? Because she’s cold and spiteful?”

“Isn’t that reason enough?”

I can tell it’s a sore subject for him, just as it is for me. I should probably drop it, but I want to get to know him better. I want to know what makes him tick, what drives him, what excites him, what scares him.

And secretly, I want to know if I could ever make him happy.

“So what’s the story with you and your mother?” I gently probe. “What else poisoned your relationship?”

He's silent for so long I think he won't answer. When he finally does, his voice is so low I can barely hear him.

"She thinks I'm too much like my father, and she resents me for it."

I draw a musical note on his skin. "How are you and your father alike?"

There's another long pause. "We're both hardheaded. Ruthlessly ambitious. Single-minded." His voice lowers. "Restless."

The last word has me tilting my head back to look at him. But he's staring into the fire, his face brooding and unreadable.

I lay my palm against his hard pec, feeling the rigid tension in his body. "How old were you when your parents divorced?"

"Fifteen."

I stroke his heated skin. "That must have been very difficult for you and your brother."

He gives a barely perceptible nod.

Getting him to open up is like pulling teeth. But I'm a very determined woman. "What happened after the divorce?"

His jaw ticks. "Mom pulled Maverick and me out of school and took us to Dallas."

"Is that where she's from?"

"Yes." He's still staring into the fire, the flames casting shadows over his face. "Her parents welcomed us back with open arms. They never approved of their daughter running off with some redneck from a podunk town. Even though Dad was a rising star at Chevron, he didn't have the right pedigree for the Billingsleys."

"Your mom's family is rich?"

Gunner nods. "They're old Dallas money. My great-grandfather raised thoroughbred racehorses before reinvesting his fortune in banking and insurance. Mom was a beauty

queen and a debutante. She wasn't supposed to marry someone like Dale Ransom."

"How did they meet?" I ask with fascinated curiosity.

"Mom was participating in a parade at the Fort Worth rodeo. Dad was visiting friends for the weekend. As the story goes, when Mom came out on the parade float, Dad took one look at her and said, 'I'm gonna marry that girl.' When his friends laughed and told him she was out of his league, he took it as a challenge to prove them wrong. He finagled an introduction and then wooed her, showering her with attention and expensive gifts. They had a whirlwind courtship and were married within three months despite her parents' strong objections. Dad bought her a big house, furs, jewelry—all the trappings of wealth she was used to. They were madly in love ... until they weren't."

I watch his expression darken, a muscle twitching in his cheek. "When did he start cheating?" I ask quietly.

"I don't know." His voice is hard. "But it wasn't just the cheating that ruined their marriage. He also had a serious gambling addiction. He gambled away our money and pawned all the family valuables. We lost damn near everything but the clothes on our backs. But even then, when we were on the brink of bankruptcy, he was too proud and stubborn to seek help from Mom's parents. They'd practically disowned her for marrying him, so he refused to accept one dime from them. That was one of the many things he and Mom argued about. Sometimes their arguments got so ugly, my brother and I would intervene before they came to blows."

I stare at him in horror. "Your father hit your mom?"

"No," he says darkly. "Maverick and I would have killed him, and he knew that. But Mom had a pretty nasty temper. When she slapped him, he usually just stormed off. But whenever he got really drunk, there was no guarantee he could restrain himself. Unfortunately, he was drunk more often than sober. So Maverick and I were always on edge, prepared for anything and primed for the worst."

My heart breaks at the pain in his voice. “I’m so sorry, Gunner,” I say softly. “No child should ever have to go through that.”

“I agree.” His chest rises and falls as he drags in an uneven breath. “After the divorce, Dad followed us to Dallas. Mom had full custody, but she honored Dad’s visitation rights. That was probably a mistake, in hindsight. He couldn’t keep a job or stay sober, and his gambling got worse. When Mav and I left home for college, our grandparents filed a restraining order against Dad to keep him away from us. He ignored it, of course, but we couldn’t bring ourselves to turn our backs on him. So we gave him money whenever he came sniffing around, and we believed him every time he promised to stop drinking and get his shit together.” Gunner’s jaw tightens. “For the past twelve years, we’ve taken turns bailing him out of trouble. It’s an endless fucking cycle.”

I lick my lips, almost afraid to ask. “Where is he now? Is he still in Dallas?”

“No,” Gunner says coldly. “He’s here in Austin. Two years ago, he totaled his car and got arrested for drunk driving. It was his third DWI, so the judge revoked his license and sentenced him to rehab instead of prison. Once he was released, he refused to come stay with me or Mav. He said he needed his independence. We knew we couldn’t leave him to his own devices, so we put him up in a senior living community for recovering addicts. He has his own private bungalow, and the property is staffed with the best medical professionals and round-the-clock security. He can’t leave the premises without getting our permission first.”

“Wow,” I say quietly. “I’m really sorry it has to be that way. But he shouldn’t be drinking and driving. My father was killed in a hit-and-run, possibly by a drunk driver. I wouldn’t wish that kind of pain on any family.”

Gunner squeezes me gently, offering silent comfort.

“Your father is very lucky to have you and Maverick. You’re saving lives, including his.”

“Which is more than he deserves.” Gunner rakes his fingers through the mussed locks on his forehead, his bicep bulging with the movement. When I reach up and cradle his cheek, he turns to look at me. His eyes are shadowed, his jaw tight.

“Thank you for opening up to me,” I say softly.

He turns his face into my palm and kisses the center of it, staring into my eyes as a tremor passes through me. “I don’t want to be a stranger to you, Marlowe. I want you to know who I am, where I’ve been and how far I still have to go.”

My heart squeezes at his words. “This is a good start,” I whisper to him.

He studies me intently, his eyes roving over my tousled hair and makeup-free face. Just when I’m starting to feel self-conscious, he rolls over on top of me, settling between my legs in a way that sends heat rushing through my body. I stare up at him as he stretches my hands above my head and pins them to the floor, his strong fingers shackling my wrists.

My heart rate thunders in my veins. “Gunner—”

“I’ve never considered myself a jealous man,” he says in a low growl. “That changed the moment I watched you climb into that motherfucker’s car. The thought of him sitting close to you, touching you, breathing the same air—it drove me fucking crazy. I had to find something to do to distract myself, or I would’ve torn the city apart looking for you.” His eyes darken in the firelight. “Please don’t put me through that again, Marlowe.”

I smile slowly. Reveling in my power. “What are you saying, Mr. Ransom?”

“No more dates with other men.”

“What about study dates with male classmates?”

His eyes narrow. “No.”

“Seriously?”

“Mixed-gender study groups are fine. One-on-ones with guys? Not a fucking chance.”

I bite my twitching lip. “You’re very possessive, aren’t you?”

“Only with you.” He flexes his hips, the broad head of his cock nudging my entrance. “Do we have an agreement?”

Pinned beneath him with my wrists bound in his hands and my body aching for his, there’s only one answer I can give: “Yes.”

His eyes flash with satisfaction. Then he wraps my legs around his waist and slides into me, and everything else fades away

Chapter Nineteen



MARLOWE

OVER THE NEXT THREE DAYS, I find myself hyperaware of Gunner's presence from the moment he arrives home until he leaves for work again. I don't have to see him walk into a room—I can just tell by the way my body tingles that he's somewhere near. Every time our eyes meet over a cup of coffee, my heart does a flutter flip. If we're not alone and he just happens to brush up against me, I have to bite my inner cheek to keep from moaning. Even picking up his dry cleaning feels like an intimate act performed by a girlfriend rather than the help.

But I *am* the help, and I can't afford to forget that. Despite his talent for giving me soul-shattering orgasms, despite the way he confided in me and claimed me as his, despite the fact that I can't get him out of my head—despite *all* these things—I'd be crazy to let myself believe I could ever have something real with Gunner. He's a billionaire, so far out of my league he might as well reside in another galaxy.

There's a reason I felt so out of place at his lavish dinner party. I was like a fish out of water among his elite circle of friends, all those expensively garbed men and women who'd looked right through me as I served them champagne. No matter what Gunner says or expects of me, I don't belong in his world. I never will.

The gloomy thought stays with me as I finish running his errands on Thursday and drive back to the estate. A dozen

groundskeepers are hard at work mowing the lawn, weeding flower beds, and pruning hedges and trees. When I pull up in front of the house, Mrs. Calder stands outside talking to the gardener. They wave at me and I wave back.

As I turn off the engine, Mr. Leland comes out to retrieve Gunner's dry cleaning from the backseat. I follow him inside and head upstairs to my room.

Walking through the door, I stop short at the sight of my cat sitting on the bed fastidiously licking her paws.

I gasp in shock. "*Sansa!*"

She hops down and races over to me, her tail waving high in the air. I scoop her up and hug her close, laughing joyously when she rubs her whiskered face against mine.

"How on earth did you get here?" I exclaim.

"Well, obviously, she teleported."

I whirl around, my jaw dropping when Quinn emerges from her hiding spot and yells, "Surprise!"

"Oh, my God!"

We rush into each other's arms and hug, squishing Sansa between us until she yowls in protest and leaps down from my arms.

"Sorry, sweet baby," I tell her with a laugh before grabbing Quinn's hands. "How long have you been here?"

"About half an hour." She grins. "When I got home from work, your boss's driver was waiting for me. He's cute, by the way. Is he single?"

"Trace? No, he has a girlfriend."

"Damn." Quinn snaps her fingers.

I laugh. "Back to what you were saying."

"Right. Where was I? Oh, yeah, he ambushed me in the parking lot—"

"Ambushed?"

“I mean, he’s big and kind of scary looking. Getting approached by a guy like that can be sort of intimidating. Plus he was strapped. He’s obviously more than just a driver.”

“You’re right. He’s also my boss’s bodyguard.” When Quinn looks at me wide-eyed, I shrug. “Gunner is a billionaire CEO with lucrative government contracts. That makes him a prime target for kidnappers and terrorists. Trace is ex Special Forces, and he only drives Gunner around in bulletproof vehicles.”

“Wow.” Quinn shakes her head, looking fascinated. “The world you inhabit now ...”

“Surreal, right? I’m definitely not in Kansas anymore.” I redirect our conversation back to the original topic. “So Trace approached you in the parking lot ...”

“Right, right. As I was saying, he introduced himself and said he’d been instructed to pick up Sansa and bring her to you. I was skeptical because you told me your boss doesn’t allow pets. I wanted to call you to see if Trace’s story checked out, but he told me Mr. Ransom wanted to surprise you.”

“Really?” I get a little lump in my throat as I watch Sansa roam around the room, making sure the accommodations are up to standard.

“Anyway,” Quinn continues, “I wasn’t about to hand Sansa over to a complete stranger without knowing more details. So I told Trace to get his boss on the phone—”

“You didn’t!”

“She did,” a deep voice confirms. “Pulled me out of an important product development meeting.”

I turn quickly to see Gunner leaning against the doorway. He’s wearing a different suit from that morning. This one is charcoal, and the first two buttons of his black shirt are undone.

I stare at him, my whole body flooding with warmth. Because he looks scrumptious, and he just gave me the most unexpected and precious gift.

“You didn’t tell me you were letting Sansa move in,” I say softly.

“That would have ruined the surprise.” The corner of his mouth quirks up. “Even after we spoke on the phone, Quinn insisted on accompanying Sansa to the house just to make sure she wasn’t being catnapped.”

Quinn shrugs and grins at me. “Sansa’s your baby and you entrusted her to my care. I knew you’d never forgive me if something happened to her.”

“You’re right,” I say with a grin. “Thank you for being such a vigilant protector.”

She does a little curtsy. “’Tis nothing, milady.”

Gunner chuckles as he walks up behind me. All the hair on my body stands on end, and it’s all I can do not to shiver.

“We have to catch up,” I tell Quinn. “Can you stay for dinner?”

Her eyes twinkle. “Actually, your boss was kind enough to invite me to stay for a sleepover. Trace will drop me off at work in the morning.”

“Awesome.” I beam at Gunner, and he winks.

Sansa skulks over to sniff at his pants leg and blink up at him. He stares back down at her, one eyebrow cocked in challenge.

With an indignant swish of her tail, Sansa stalks off to continue exploring her new home.

I smile ruefully at Gunner. “She was a stray, so she’s still leery of strangers. Give her time to warm up to you.”

“Or we can just avoid each other,” he proposes dryly. “That works for me, too.”

“Aw, don’t be like that,” I say, laughing. “I want you and Sansa to be friends. It’ll happen, don’t worry.”

“Do I look worried?”

“Not particularly.” I grin.

Lips twitching, he flicks his wrist to check his watch. “I have a board of trustees meeting, so I’d better get going.”

I smile at him. “Thank you for this. I know you’re not a cat person, but having Sansa here means the world to me.”

His gaze softens. He strokes a gentle palm down my hair, and my heart goes all fluttery.

As he stares at my lips, I can tell he wants to kiss me. Even though I want him to, I know he won’t. Not in front of Quinn, which is probably wise since I haven’t told her about our changed relationship status.

He touches my cheek and winks, then smiles at Quinn. “Make yourself at home.”

“Will do,” she gushes. “Thanks for letting me stay over with my bestie.”

“Anytime.” Giving me one last warm look, Gunner saunters out the door.

Quinn barely waits two seconds before squealing breathlessly, “Oh, my God! He’s so fucking hot!”

I grin as she grabs my hands, jumping up and down before tugging me over to the bed where we flop backward, laughing like teenagers.

Quinn pushes herself up on one elbow and sweeps an amazed look around. “Holy shit, Mar. This place is absolutely phenomenal. It looks even more incredible than the pictures I saw in *Architectural Digest*.”

“I know. I’m still getting used to it.”

“No shit. You’re living like a freaking princess!”

I snort-laugh. “How many princesses do you know who scrub toilets and mop floors all day?”

“Point taken.” Quinn flops back down and grins at the high ceiling. “I can’t get over how sexy Gunner is. I didn’t think it was possible, but he’s even yummier in person.” She giggles. “And how adorable was that little standoff between him and

Sansa? He's gonna have her eating out of the palm of his hand in *no* time."

"I hope so. I'd hate for him to send her packing."

"And risk upsetting you? No way."

I turn my head to look at Quinn. "What do you mean?"

"Don't play innocent with me." She grins wickedly. "You're fucking him, aren't you? Don't even try to deny it," she warns before I can open my mouth. "The last time I saw you, you were bitching about him cockblocking your date and forcing you to work overtime. You ranted about him all weekend and even applied for a new job. So imagine my shock when he sent his driver to pick up Sansa today. You told me he hates cats, so why would he suddenly reverse his no-pet policy? I figured something must've changed between you two, but I wasn't completely sure until I saw you together. The way he looked at you and stroked your hair *totally* sealed the deal."

I blush, biting my lip. "Things have gotten ... interesting between us."

"How interesting?"

"Ummm ..."

Quinn sits up, her eyes gleaming. "Spill it."

So I do. I tell her about our late night kitchen interlude, which led to a record-breaking number of orgasms. I tell her about his mother's surprise visit and the ugly fight we had afterward. I tell her about my disastrous date with Dawson, a mistake I rectified by seducing Gunner in the shower.

I lose count of how many times she squeals during my story. Though I keep the intimate details to a minimum, I provide just enough to send her into an excited frenzy of fanning herself and chanting "*Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod!*"

When I'm done, she crows triumphantly, "See? You and Dawson were never meant to be!"

I snort. "*That's* an understatement."

She laughs, sitting cross-legged on the bed. “You lucky bitch, having mind-blowing sex with your hot billionaire boss. No wonder your skin practically melted off your bones when he walked into the room.”

My face warms. “You noticed that?”

“Hell, yeah.” A salacious grin curves her lips. “Does he have a big dick? I bet he does.”

“Quinn!”

She howls with wicked laughter.

I shake my head at her, cheeks burning. “I might have to rethink this sleepover.”

“No! I promise I’ll be good!”

“You better be.” I grin.

Quinn blows her lavender hair out of her eyes and props her chin on her fist, studying me with a sober expression. “So what happens now?”

“You mean now that we’ve crossed the line between boss and employee?” I shake my head helplessly and sigh. “I don’t know.”

“What do you *want* to happen?”

I swallow, my throat suddenly tight. “I don’t want to want anything,” I confess, feeling vulnerable and not liking it. “I mean, he’s my boss. And he’s gorgeous and obscenely rich and can have any woman he wants” I trail off, running out of words. Because, really, what else is there to say?

“He might be completely unattainable. Most billionaires are,” Quinn quietly concedes. “But this particular billionaire just went out of his way to do something nice for you because he wanted to make you happy. That’s no small gesture, Marlowe.”

Something like hope stirs in my chest, as faint as a butterfly’s wing. “Maybe,” I whisper.

Quinn falls silent, watching me almost sympathetically.

“Anyway.” I roll onto my side to face her, resting on my elbow. “Enough about me. What’s going on with you?”

“Not much. Well, unless you count what happened on Saturday.”

I eye her curiously. “What happened on Saturday?”

A wicked spark lights her eyes. “I slept with the neighbor.”

“Um, what?”

“I had sex with the neighbor.”

“Seriously?” I gape at her. “Which one?”

She hesitates, biting her lip. “The indie musician.”

My mouth drops open. “The grungy stoner who looks like he never showers? The caveman who barely grunts a hello whenever we pass him in the hallway? *That* guy?”

Quinn grins. “Yup.”

“Oh, my God!” I shriek in disbelief.

She bursts out laughing.

“How?” I demand, sitting up on my knees. “How the hell did that even happen? I mean, is that dude even capable of holding a conversation?”

Quinn leers. “He was capable enough to talk me out of my panties.”

I slap my hands over my face and groan.

She cackles at my reaction. “Believe me, I had no intention of sleeping with him when I knocked on his door that day. I got some of his mail by mistake—*again*—so I went to his apartment to give him his stuff. The last time it happened, he snatched the mail out of my hand and slammed the door in my face. But this time he invited me in for a beer. He had his guitar out and was working on new music. Being a polite guest, I asked him to play something for me. The song wasn’t that great, but the way his greasy hair flopped over his eyes just did something to me. One minute I was clapping and

asking for an encore, the next minute we were making out on his smelly couch.”

I wrinkle my nose. “His couch is smelly?”

“And sticky.”

“Eww,” I groan, covering my face again. “That’s so fucking gross.”

“I know,” Quinn agrees, giggling.

I peek out at her from between my fingers. “Was the sex good at least?”

“It was great. I came so hard I saw stars.” She purses her lips thoughtfully. “Or maybe I was just high from all the weed smoke in the air. His freaking apartment is one big hothouse.”

We look at each other for a second and then burst into laughter, clutching our sides.

As our mirth dies down, we wipe tears from our eyes and share a lopsided grin.

“Enough about my sexploits.” Quinn rubs her hands together. “You have to give me the grand tour of this palace. And the older lady—Mrs. Calder? She said we can relax in the sauna after dinner. This place has a freaking *sauna*?”

I grin. “There’s a whole spa, gym and pool on the first floor. Every bathroom has a bidet, the kitchen is to die for, and just wait till you taste Gustav’s cooking.”

Quinn beams with glee.

My grin softens. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“So am I,” Quinn whoops excitedly. “Let the epic sleepover begin!”

Chapter Twenty



MARLOWE

IT'S MY FIRST DAY OF GRAD school and I'm bursting with excitement.

My only class that day is a three-hour lecture in the UTA Building, located two blocks from the main campus. I get there twenty minutes early and claim a seat in the front row of the empty classroom.

With time to spare, I take out my laptop and set it on the table. When my phone's musical ringtone trills from my purse, I rummage around until I find it. My good mood bursts like a pricked bubble when I see MOM on the screen.

I could ignore her call, which I've been doing for the past two weeks. But she's my mother so I can't avoid her forever.

I take a deep breath, mentally bracing myself before hitting the answer button. "Hey, Mom."

"Well, look who finally answered her phone," she says with exaggerated shock.

I suppress a sigh. "Sorry. I've been busy."

"Not too busy to take your sister's calls. You talk to *her* every day."

"Not every day," I argue.

"Close enough. Anyway, she told me you started school today."

“Yes, I’m actually in class right—”

“Excellent. Make sure you take good notes and meet regularly with your advisor. Grad school is a great deal more challenging than undergrad. It’s very important to get off to a good start.”

“Thanks for the advice,” I murmur as two laughing students walk through the door.

“I was planning to send you some new clothes for school, but since you couldn’t be bothered to take my calls ...” She deliberately trails off, her reprimand hanging in the air before she says, “I hope you’re dressed appropriately for class. Grad school is a job, and you should always dress for the job you want.”

I look down at my white cap-sleeve shirt, khaki shorts and flat sandals. Though far from slovenly, the outfit would never pass my mother’s stringent standards, and I take some perverse satisfaction in that.

“Anyway,” she continues more cheerfully, “how are you getting along with your new boss?”

“Um, fine.”

“I hope he’s pleased with the quality of your work.”

“I think so,” I say, trying not to blush at the wicked turn of my thoughts. “I haven’t heard any complaints.”

Mom titters. “That’s my girl.”

Really? Since when?

“My friends and colleagues are so impressed that my daughter works for *the* Gunner Ransom,” Mom gushes.

I can’t help smirking. “Did you tell them I’m his housekeeper?”

“Of course. Why would I leave out that detail?”

Because you’ve always disparaged my lowly cleaning jobs? Because you’re ashamed of me?

As more students file into the classroom, Mom sighs airily. “I’m thinking about flying down there for a—”

“What?” I squeak, alarm shooting through me. “You want to come here? To Texas?”

“Well, yes. I thought it would be nice to see where you live and spend a few days together.”

“Um ...” I glance across the room as the professor strides through the door. “I have to go, Mom. Class is starting.”

“All right. But what do you think—”

“We’ll talk later.” I hang up on her and stuff my phone back into my purse.

Dread knots my stomach at the thought of hanging out with my mother, shopping together, going for lattes, getting a manicure, pretending that everything is normal between us. I’d rather be trapped inside a medieval torture chamber.

Of course, she has no interest in spending time with me. The only reason she wants to visit is because I work for a billionaire. I don’t know what she plans to do or what she hopes to accomplish by meeting Gunner. But I have no intention of giving her a chance to embarrass me, which she most definitely would.

“Welcome to Intro to Information Resources and Services,” the professor announces, drawing my attention to the front of the room. He introduces himself, shares a bit of his background and cracks a witty joke that draws laughter from the class.

Feeling some of my good mood return, I shove thoughts of my mother aside and focus on what I came here for.

I GET HOME FROM CLASS THAT evening to find Gunner stretched out on my couch with Sansa curled up on his chest, both fast asleep.

The sight of them melts my heart into a puddle, and I’m pretty sure my ovaries explode.

I set my backpack down, pull out my phone and quietly snap a picture of the sleeping pair. Then I tiptoe across the

room and squat beside the couch to stroke Sansa's soft fur. I smile when she starts purring.

"I know he's irresistible, but he's mine," I whisper to her. "Get your own man."

She flicks her tail as if to say *Fuck off*.

Stifling a laugh, I look up to find Gunner staring at me from under his thick lashes. My stomach flutters like crazy. "You're awake."

"Hmm." His eyes are heavy lidded, a lazy smile curving his lips. "How was your first day of class?"

"Awesome. The lecture was a bit long but highly informative. I have a ton of reading to do." I grin at him. "I see you and Sansa are getting along. That didn't take any time at all."

He glances down at the drowsing cat on his chest. "She must've made herself comfortable after I dozed off."

"Because she likes you." I grin knowingly. "And you like her, too."

He grunts. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Seriously? Just look at you two all cuddled up and taking a nap together. You've clearly bonded."

"Maybe." He strokes a hand down Sansa's back and she purrs louder than I've ever heard her.

I snort with feigned disgust. "Putty in your hands. Literally."

The corner of his mouth kicks up in an ironic smile. "My mother's cat hates my guts, and the feeling is mutual."

"I'm really sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. I'm not shedding any tears." He runs a finger down the side of my face, leaving a trail of goose bumps.

I bite my lower lip, smiling at him. "Sansa's a good judge of character. Plus she can tell that I trust you, which lets her know *she* can, too."

Gunner's expression turns serious. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Trust me."

I stare at him, my breathing suddenly shallow. "Should I?"

He goes quiet, his eyes boring into me with an intensity that makes my belly clench.

Please say I can trust you, I silently beg. Please promise you won't hurt me.

His lips part. "I think—"

"Sansa," Mrs. Calder calls from downstairs, "dinner's ready!"

Sansa leaps off Gunner's chest and races out the door so fast that we burst out laughing.

Mrs. Calder has been spoiling my cat all week, feeding her fresh meals made from raw meat and fish, cooked grains and vegetables. Sansa has never eaten so good, and I couldn't be more grateful.

As Gunner brushes an escaping strand of hair away from my face, I smile into his beautiful eyes. "Have you had dinner?"

"No. I was waiting for you." His thumb strokes my cheekbone. "We can eat together while you tell me all about your first day of grad school."

"Okay." Smiling harder, I rise from the floor and hold out my hand to him.

Instead of taking it, he sits up and hauls me down to his lap, bringing our bodies flush together. My nipples peak beneath my bra and tingles race to my core.

As his big hands slide under my bottom, I circle my arms around his neck and cuddle into him. He's wearing a dark gray Henley that clings to his broad shoulders and muscular chest. His skin is warm beneath the soft cotton, and I like the rough scrape of his jeans against the insides of my thighs.

“I just realized something,” I say, surprised. “You’re not wearing a suit today.”

“Mmm,” he murmurs, his breath brushing over the delicate skin behind my ear. “Your powers of observation are impressive.”

I laugh. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.” He catches my sensitive earlobe in his teeth, making me shiver and close my eyes.

“Everyone must’ve been shocked when you showed up to work in jeans,” I tease. “They probably thought you’d been invaded by an alien.”

“Probably.” He nips my jaw.

Smiling, I bury my face in his neck and inhale his yummy scent, savoring the soft rasp of his beard stubble against my skin. “So why aren’t you wearing a suit today, Mr. CEO?”

“Does it matter?” He spears his hand into my hair, his fingers sifting through the strands.

I lift my head to give him a smug grin. “It’s because I teased you that day in your office, isn’t it? I made fun of you for wearing suits every day. I got inside your head.”

“Oh, you have. No doubt about that.” He palms the back of my head and presses his lips to mine in a slow, drugging kiss that leaves my panties sticking damply to my folds.

“Ready for dinner?” he murmurs against my lips.

I nod, too breathless to speak.

“I told Gustav to serve us in my room. We’re going to dine on the balcony, share a bottle of wine and watch the sunset. When we’re done, I’m going to carry you to the shower and fuck your brains out.” His eyes gleam at my whimper before he rumbles on, “From the shower we’ll move to the bed. I’m going to make love to you, Marlowe, until you’re too damn exhausted to even think about sneaking back to your room.”

“But Mrs. Calder—”

“Wasn’t born yesterday. If you think she doesn’t know about us, you’re fooling yourself.” He bites my bottom lip and soothes the sting with his tongue, getting my panties wetter. “Any more questions?”

I shake my head.

“Good girl.” He smacks my ass. “Now let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

AFTER DINNER WE LINGER ON THE BALCONY, lost in light conversation and a savory red wine. The summer night is sticky and warm, the moon hanging low over the lake.

I end up on Gunner’s lap at some point, probably around the time he pours me a third glass of wine.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” I tease.

“Now why would I do that,” he murmurs, “when there are so many things I want to do to you tonight?”

My thighs clench at his words. I’m sitting sideways across his lap, barefoot, my arms wrapped around his neck. Our faces are close enough that we’re breathing each other’s air, our heartbeats practically synced.

Taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger, Gunner gently brushes his mouth over mine.

My heart pounds, my belly breaking into wild flutters. Gazing into my eyes, he traces the seam of my lips with his tongue, causing my whole body to quiver against him.

He makes a hungry sound, a dark hum I feel low in my stomach. Then he opens my mouth with his lips, his tongue sliding in. The wine-scented heat of his mouth is downright intoxicating. I breathe his name, wondering if his kisses will always reduce my body to a mindless puddle of want.

He palms my face, his tongue tasting my mouth in hot, luscious strokes. I whimper with pleasure and writhe in his lap, trying to quench the pulsing ache between my legs.

A guttural noise rumbles from his throat, his hand moving down to squeeze my hip and my thigh. His dick is impossibly hard beneath my bottom, making me moan as he grinds

himself against me. The friction has my clit throbbing and pulse rioting until I'm panting into our kiss.

"Fuck, Marlowe." He stands up, lifting me with him and shifting my body so that my legs wrap around his hips. His hardness presses into the seam of my shorts, and I can't help rubbing against him.

He groans thickly and bites my bottom lip, plunging one hand into my hair while the other grips my ass, grinding us together.

Moaning into his mouth, I run my hands over his shoulders, enjoying the flex of hard muscle beneath his shirt. His fingers tighten in my hair, tugging my head back as his lips trail along my jaw and neck, tasting my skin. Then he returns to my mouth, taking it like he wants to devour me right there.

Trembling with need, I rake my fingers through his hair, fisting thick handfuls to bring him even closer as I suck his lower lip.

With a raspy groan, he swings me around and strides across the balcony to deposit me on the wide lounger. I stare up at him, breathless and dizzy, my panties so wet they're plastered to my skin.

"Don't move." He goes inside and comes back out with a tube of lube, his night-dark eyes glittering with intent.

My mouth runs dry as I watch him set the lube on a table beside me. Then he cups my jaw, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip.

"Gunner—"

"Take off your clothes." His voice is like silk over steel.

Shivers dance down my spine to pool in my belly. I begin undressing, peeling off my shorts and cotton panties and playfully tossing both at his face.

He catches them midair, never taking his eyes off me as I pull my shirt off and unhook my strapless bra. It falls away, freeing my breasts with a bounce.

Gunner is silent, his hooded eyes smoldering in the moonlight.

I push my hair into a messy tousle and give him a coy smile. “Your turn.”

He strips his shirt off. Shoves his jeans and boxer briefs down his legs. Then he stands before me, gloriously naked, his cock bobbing toward my face.

I swallow hard, my pussy heating with arousal. “Maybe we should take this inside,” I whisper.

“Why?”

“We’re out in the open.” I gesture around the large balcony and toward the lake. “Someone might see us.”

“Who? We’re on private property and there’s not another house for miles.” His eyes gleam wolfishly. “Even if someone did see us, something tells me you’d enjoy it.”

I bite my lip, cheeks flushing. “I’m not an exhibitionist.”

“You didn’t think you enjoyed being spanked or denied orgasms, but here we are.” He winks at me. “Don’t knock it till you try it.”

My clit twitches at his words. He’s right, of course. He’s broadening my horizons in ways I never dreamed or imagined. If any man can unleash my inner exhibitionist, *he* can.

Licking my lips, I hitch my chin toward the lube. “I don’t need that. Not with you.”

“You will tonight.” He fists his cock, giving it a long slow stroke.

I stare at him, my pulse going berserk. “What—”

“I’m going to fuck your tight little ass, Marlowe,” he rumbles, dark and seductive. “You’re going to take every inch of me like a good girl, and you’re going to come so hard you’ll forget your own fucking name.”

His filthy words set off an avalanche of need inside me, potent and hot and thrilling. I’ve never had anal sex before.

I've always been curious about it, but I've never met a guy I wanted to try it with. Until now.

“Get on all fours.”

I obey without hesitation, pulse racing with excitement as he moves behind me and cups my dewy pussy in his hand. I groan and close my eyes, my hips swiveling as he slowly rubs my clit, the little bundle of nerves knotting tight.

Dropping to his haunches, he smears lube over my asshole and rims me with blunt fingers. With each expert swirl, he presses deeper and deeper into my puckered opening, and I moan as everything inside me clenches painfully.

He murmurs something I can't make out. Then he pushes his finger all the way in to his knuckle.

A soft cry stutters out of me, the virgin muscles fluttering around him.

“Perfect,” he rumbles. “You're almost ready.”

His slick digit stirs in my ass, circling and stretching me while the rough pad of his thumb rubs my needy clit. As spasms of raw pleasure roll through me, I moan his name and squeeze my thighs together.

He spans my right ass cheek, wordlessly commanding me to spread my legs for him so he can have access again. I obey at once, shivering under the searing heat of his palm. When he drags his tongue down the crack of my ass, I quiver all over, biting into the lounge cushion to muffle my loud moan.

His answering growl thrums in the sultry air around us, his breath fanning over my skin and raising goose bumps. He licks my crease a few more times, the lewd carnality of the gesture coaxing wetness from my pussy, which he spreads over my puckered hole.

Surging to his feet, he squirts more lube down the crack of my ass, parting my cheeks. I moan and roll my hips back, watching over my shoulder as he pours some gel into his hand and lubes up his hard cock.

He then takes me by the shoulders and turns my body toward the end of the lounge. I'm on my hands and knees, my ass lifted high as he kneels behind me with one foot on the floor, his other leg up on the chair.

I tremble as he spreads my cheeks with his hands and presses the head of his cock against my tight opening. My clit pinches and my stomach quivers with anticipation. Anticipation mingled with more than a little fear.

Grasping me by my hips, Gunner slides the first thick inch of his dick inside me, pushing past the puckered ring of muscle.

My breath explodes from my lungs. "Oh God."

"Press back against me," he orders roughly.

I do as I'm told, gasping as he buries his cock deeper. My entire body convulses, pleasure mixing with the sharper sting of pain. He's stretching me impossibly and it hurts like hell but also feels good. How can both be true?

Gunner pauses, his big cock throbbing in my sensitive canal as he grits out, "You all right?"

"Yes," I gasp, arching my back to push into him.

His animalistic growl makes my skin sizzle and my pussy spasm. When I peer back at him, his eyes are hooded and his jaw is set in a brutally tight line. Meeting my gaze, he brings his hand down on my ass cheek in a stinging slap.

I cry out in shock, clenching so tightly around him that he hisses before spanking me again.

I moan deliriously, my legs quaking as he begins moving inside me. His hard cock glides out and then in again, lubricating me with my streaming juices. Tears fill my eyes, pain and pleasure mingling in an unbearable storm of sensation.

He reaches between my spread thighs, tracing lazy circles around my clit to distract me from the discomfort. As my puckered hole loosens up more, he groans approvingly,

“That’s it, angel. Open up for me. Take me as deep as you can.”

I whimper as he leans down and takes possession of my mouth the way he’s possessing my virgin ass, spearing his tongue in and out in tandem with his thrusts. The combined sensations are so intense that I have to break the kiss to gasp for breath, turning my head away to rest my cheek against the lounge chair.

I can feel his muscled thighs straining against the backs of mine, each slap of his hips sending ripples over my heated flesh and making my ass jiggle.

“Yes,” I keened, throwing back my head. “Oh, my God, yes!”

“You feel so fucking good, Marlowe,” he growls fiercely. “Your body was made for me. You know that, don’t you? You can never belong to anyone else.”

“Never,” I gasp, agreeing wholeheartedly.

He moves faster, fucking me harder. I moan incoherently and lower my upper body, sinking from my hands to my elbows. He keeps one hand on my hip and brings the other around to squeeze my achy breast as he pummels my ass, forcing me to take each powerful slam of his cock.

I’ve never experienced anything like this before. It’s too good. Too raw. Too much.

“That’s it,” he rasps, now gripping my ass cheeks hard enough to leave handprints. “That’s it, baby, fuck me back.”

I groan his name, pussy throbbing and toes curling. When I look over my shoulder at him, his skin is sweaty and glistening in the moonlight, pecs bulging, abs contracting, his possessive gaze locked on mine.

“My dirty fucking girl. I knew you’d love it. I knew you’d love having my cock up your ass.” He wraps my hair around his fist and tugs until my back arches like a bow. “You take my cock so good, sweet girl. I’m gonna come so hard in your hot little hole.”

I bite my lip hard, trying not to scream. Just because his household employees know we're involved doesn't mean I want them to hear us having no-holds-barred sex.

"Don't get quiet on me," Gunner scolds darkly. "Tell me how you're feeling. Tell me what you need."

"More," I pant, breathless. "Give me more."

"Such a greedy little girl." He plows into me over and over, his hips slapping loudly against my ass. I sob with pleasure, slamming my hips back into his, desperate for an orgasm that's just out of reach.

"Fucking hell, kitten."

The night air is filled with our gasps and groans, the pounding of skin against skin, the steady creak of the lounge chair. Sweat trickles between my breasts, drips from my nipples and runs in rivulets down to my fluttering pussy.

"Gunner ... oh please ... oh God." I arch my back, crying out his name, begging for release.

He groans his pleasure. "Almost there, angel. So fucking close."

My breath escapes on a whine as he pounds deeper into me, his balls smacking my clit with every long stroke of his thick hard length. I thrust back against him as he reaches between my legs and strums my swollen clit, then slides two fingers inside my creamy pussy, possessing me every which way he can.

"Come for me, Marlowe," he commands in a raspy voice. "Let me feel your tight little ass squeeze my cock when you lose control."

I let out a throaty choking sob as the dam finally breaks, my thighs shaking so hard it rocks my whole body.

"That's it, angel," Gunner croons, his thumb working my clit.

I throw back my head, my climax forcing a scream from my tight throat.

“That’s right, baby, scream for me. Scream my name so everyone will know exactly who you belong to.”

“*Gunner*,” I wail, trembling violently from the strength and ferocity of my orgasm. The first one is still tearing through my body when another hits me out of nowhere. I sob loud and long, tears of ecstasy streaming down my face.

Gunner growls and shudders against me, hips bucking in a wild fury. Then he thunders out an animal groan, pumping his hot seed into my asshole. With his fingers buried in my pussy and his cock in my ass, he comes and comes until I’m full to the brim and his balls are drained.

We collapse together on the lounge, his heavy body sprawling on top of me. We’re both panting hard, the smell of sweat and raw sex permeating the humid night.

Gunner kisses my shoulder, his chest vibrating against my back as he rumbles, “I was rough with you.”

“Is that an apology?”

“Do you want one?”

“Did you hear me complaining?”

“No.” He smiles against my skin. “You’re phenomenal.”

His praise makes me bloom like a hothouse flower. “You’re not too bad yourself, Mr. Ransom.”

We stay in that position until he softens and pulls slowly out of me. A hot gush of semen trickles down between my thighs until I’m lying in a puddle.

“Holy shit,” I breathe. “That’s a lot of jizz.”

His husky laugh caresses my shoulder as he palms one cheek of my ass and squeezes gently. Then he stretches out next to me on the lounge and tucks me into his side. I close my eyes, a drowsy smile curving my lips.

I don’t know how long we lay there under the moon. I’m boneless, sex drunk. I doze off and wake to him picking me up like a bride, my slick naked skin sliding against his.

“Where’re we going?” I mumble dazedly.

“I’m going to give you a warm bath,” he murmurs against my temple. “It was your first time and you were such a good girl. You deserve some TLC.”

Chapter Twenty-One



MARLOWE

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, Gunner receives an overseas business call.

Whispering an apology to me, he slides out of bed and pulls on his pajama bottoms, then slips out of the room to take the call in his study. I'm thoroughly exhausted from our sexploits on the balcony. But I miss the warmth of his body so much that I can't go back to sleep.

So I get up and put on his silk pajama top. It engulfs me, hanging down to my knees. I roll the sleeves back several times until my hands and wrists are exposed. Then I creep silently downstairs, stopping in the kitchen for a glass of water before wandering down the hall to the library.

Even after a month of living with Gunner, I remain awed by the grandeur of his library. An enormous picture window flanked by leather armchairs overlooks the lake. Row after row of books line the walls, with rolling mahogany ladders providing access to the upper shelves. There's a Chesterfield couch with matching chairs, plush rugs and a corner fireplace—perfect for curling up with a book on a cold winter night.

Though I love every square inch of the mansion, the library is my favorite room. This is where I spend most of my lunch breaks, wheeling a ladder from shelf to shelf as I explore the vast collection of titles, plucking out a book here and there to read random passages.

I always feel like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, and tonight is no exception as I roam along the bookshelves, running my finger over leatherbound spines of all colors and sizes. There are first editions of everything from Plato to Poe, Aristotle to Nietzsche, Descartes to Voltaire. There's even a mint copy of *Justine* by the Marquis de Sade. The thought of Gunner reading the erotic novel makes me grin.

"You're in librarian heaven right now, aren't you?"

I turn to see him leaning against the doorframe, eating from a carton of double fudge ice cream.

I raise an eyebrow. "Ice cream? In the middle of the night?"

"I had a craving for chocolate." As he saunters toward me, the combination of his messy hair, washboard abs and sexy bare feet scrambles my brain. I watch dazedly as he spoons up some ice cream and brings it to my lips. "Have a taste."

"I'd better n—"

"C'mon, darlin'. Be bad with me." The man could entice a whole convent of nuns to break their vow of chastity. What chance do I possibly have?

I open my mouth, letting him slide the spoonful of ice cream between my lips. I moan as the decadent chocolate melts on my tongue and slides down my throat.

"Atta girl," he murmurs, licking the spoon after me.

I sigh. "I'm gonna pay for that tomorrow when I have to run twenty miles to burn off all those extra calories."

He gives me a dirty grin. "I can think of several creative ways to help you burn calories. Just say the word."

I chuckle. "I think we've burned enough calories for one night, don't you?"

"There's no such thing as enough when it comes to me fucking you."

"Oh my." I watch transfixed as he licks chocolate off the back of the spoon, turns it over and licks the inside with a slow

curl of his tongue.

As the muscles between my thighs clench, I bite my bottom lip.

His eyes glitter as if he knows the effect he has on me. “I’m too wired to go back to bed. Let’s hang out for a while.”

“Okay,” I whisper distractedly.

We happen to be standing by a large mahogany table near the window. He sets the ice cream down, then wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me onto the table. I scoot back and sit lotus-style with his long shirt tented over my knees, concealing my bare crotch.

He nimbly climbs onto the table so that we sit facing each other with the carton of ice cream between us. It reminds me of Molly Ringwald and Jake Ryan in the final scene from *Sixteen Candles*, an eighties romcom that Ember and I watched with our mother more times than I’ll ever admit.

“How’d your call go?” I ask Gunner. “Everything okay?”

“For now. Just need to keep a close eye on some unfolding developments in the European energy market.” He feeds me more ice cream, watching with that smoldering intensity as I swallow the mouthful of fudgy bliss and groan.

“My mom would so not approve of what I’m doing right now. I can just hear her tut-tutting me, ‘Now how many times have I told you, Marlowe? A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.’”

“Screw her,” Gunner growls.

“Easy for *you* to say,” I tease, gesturing to his godlike body. “*You* don’t have to worry about cellulite and—”

“Stop it. There’s not a damn thing wrong with your body. You’re fucking beautiful from head to toe.”

I nearly swoon right off the table.

“I wasn’t fishing for compliments,” I say shyly. “But thank you.”

“Just speaking the truth,” he replies, fixing me with a steady, gentle gaze. “We all have an inner critic. Growing up with a toxic parent can magnify those voices in our head, the voices that tell us we’re not good enough, that we’re doomed to fail no matter how hard we try. Don’t give your mother that much power over you. She doesn’t deserve it. No one does.”

I stare at him, marveling that I’ve found a man who seems to understand me on a deep level that transcends physical intimacy. It’s a little scary. Okay, *a lot* scary.

Glancing away from him, I toy with the spoon buried in the ice cream. “It’s hard to believe someone as accomplished as you could ever doubt your worth.”

“You’d be surprised.” He’s still watching me, searching my face with a thoroughness that’s a little unnerving. “Tell me more about your relationship with your mother.”

A jagged pain tightens my chest. I lower my eyes to my lap, reluctant to wade into the troubled waters of my childhood.

Gunner waits silently.

“She’s never liked me.” My voice catches on the words. “Even when I was little, she was always super critical. No matter how hard I tried to please her, I couldn’t do anything right. After my dad died, she abandoned any pretense of caring about me. My sister was her favorite and she made no attempt to hide it.”

“I’m sorry.” Fury laces Gunner’s quiet tone. “You didn’t deserve that.”

A wry, sad smile touches my lips. “Unfortunately for her, the worse she treated me, the more Ember loved and protected me.” I swallow hard, allowing myself a moment before soldiering on. “Shortly after Dad passed away, Mom donated his record collection to charity even though she knew he would’ve wanted me to have it. I was devastated, and Ember was so furious she didn’t speak to Mom for two whole weeks. Honestly, I think her silent treatment bothered Mom more than my tears.”

Gunner reaches over and takes my hand, his thumb playing circles along the back of it. His tender compassion makes me want to keep talking. So I do.

“She’s always been status-obsessed. She came from a typical blue-collar family in Pittsburgh. Both her father and grandfather worked in the steel mills, and she hated that life. She had big dreams and ambitions. Going to law school was her ticket out of middle-class mediocrity, she used to say. Working at a prestigious law firm opened up a whole new world to her. Suddenly she was going to the opera, attending fancy dinner parties and hobnobbing with bigwigs. She planned to marry some rich guy and become part of a power couple.” I pause, smiling faintly. “She married my father instead.”

“The band teacher,” Gunner murmurs. “She married for love.”

“Yes,” I say softly. “It was definitely love. They were good together. Really happy. But after Dad died ...” My voice trails off, throat tightening.

Gunner gently squeezes my hand, comforting me without words.

I lick my lips. “Anyway, she wanted me to become an attorney like her, but I had no interest in practicing law. When I told her I’d be majoring in music, she got mad and refused to pay my tuition. Given her high income, I didn’t get much financial aid, and my partial scholarship only covered some of my expenses. To pay for the rest, I got a housekeeping job at a hotel. I also spent four semesters as an assistant to the chair of the music department. Having to work two jobs felt unfair at the time, but it wasn’t. Putting myself through school made me stronger. It made me work harder and not take my education for granted. It taught me how to survive on my own.”

Gunner brings my hand to his lips and kisses the back, gazing into my eyes. “You’re absolutely incredible, you know that?”

I smile softly. “That’s high praise coming from someone like you.”

“Someone like me?”

I gesture to the nearby wall showcasing framed covers of *Forbes*, *Fortune 500*, *Money* and other magazines featuring articles about Gunner. The *Forbes* cover has a photo of him and Maverick in killer suits, standing back to back with the caption MEET THE TWIN TECH TITANS OF SILICON HILLS.

It’s hard not to feel completely awed by the magnitude of Gunner’s power, wealth and influence. The fact that he’s my lover adds another level of surrealness.

“What made you get into the tech industry?” I ask him.

He smiles faintly. “I was a code monkey in high school. I enjoyed programming and playing around with algorithms to figure out how they work.”

I grin teasingly. “I know I’m not the first person who’s ever told you that you’re way too hot to be a computer geek.”

He chuckles dryly. “I may have heard that once or twice.”

My grin widens. “I’m trying to picture you as a socially awkward, fashion-challenged nerd huddled over your computer while a *Star Trek* marathon plays in the background.”

He snorts. “For your information, I’ve never been ‘fashion challenged’ a day in my life.” Pause. “But the rest is pretty accurate.”

I laugh, thoroughly delighted.

His eyes sparkle at me. “The thing is, I was a privileged rich kid who’d seen and done more than most people will experience in a lifetime. There was only so much skiing, horseback riding and globetrotting I could do before boredom kicked in. I was restless as hell, always looking for new challenges and adventures.” He pauses. “That’s how I got into hacking.”

My eyes widen. “You were a hacker?”

“Shh.” He puts his finger to his lips, a mischievous glitter lighting his eyes. “Big Brother might be listening.”

I laugh, ridiculously titillated by the idea of him living on the edge as a bad boy hacker. “What kind of things did you h-a-c-k?” I say, spelling out the word with exaggerated caution.

He grins at me. “At first it was just harmless pranks. Like breaking into country club databases to switch people’s tee times and dinner reservations. Or hacking into newspaper websites to replace story headlines with satirical ones.”

I laugh in disbelief. “What a devious little shit you were.”

“I prefer the term *disruptor*,” he says archly.

I snort and roll my eyes.

He chuckles before continuing, “Hacking gave me even more of an adrenaline rush than skydiving, bungee jumping or running with the bulls in Pamplona. It was insanely addictive. I found underground hacker communities and lurked on the forums, soaking up as much knowledge as I could. I had zero interest in committing crimes or ruining innocent people’s lives. I just wanted to push boundaries, shake things up a little. As my skills improved, I escalated to riskier challenges.”

I give him a wary look. “How risky?”

“At age seventeen, I was one of four hackers to crack a classified encryption algorithm run by the military.”

“Holy shit,” I breathe.

His mouth twitches at my reaction.

“That’s insane, Gunner. Did any of you get caught?”

“No. We covered our tracks too well. But it was a close call, so after that I decided to lay low for a while. Fast forward two years, I was a sophomore computer science major at UT. One day out of the blue, a three-letter agency contacted me about working for them as an information security specialist. I was suspicious, of course. I thought the feds had finally caught up to me. I thought they were laying a trap by dangling a job offer in front of my face.”

I find myself leaning forward, sucked into his story. “Were they?”

“No,” he says with a trace of humor. “As it turns out, one of my professors had been bragging about my coding genius to people in high places. After some back and forth, the agency hired me to expose security vulnerabilities in their systems.”

“Wait. Let me get this straight. The government recruited you to hack their network to protect them from malicious hackers, completely unaware that *you* once cracked a military encryption code?”

His lips curve. “The irony wasn’t lost on me.”

“I bet,” I say, laughing. “So you were a college student by day and a white hat hacker by night.”

“Basically.” He chuckles. “It was a good job. The hours were flexible, I worked remotely from campus and the pay was phenomenal. Over the course of those three years, I gained valuable experience and made important contacts that proved useful when I launched my startup.”

“That’s awesome, Gunner,” I say warmly. “Did you always know you wanted to be an entrepreneur?”

“I knew pretty early on.” A hint of a smile plays on his lips. “Once I decided to use my programming skills for good, I devoted my energies to developing an app to help businesses combat ransomware attacks. Given that my last name is Ransom,” he adds wryly, “you can see why I chose not to name the company after myself.”

I grin. “Good call.”

“It seems to have worked out well,” he drawls.

“I’d say so.” I scoop up a mouthful of melting ice cream and lick the spoon, watching Gunner’s eyes darken. I can feel the coiled energy beneath his lazy posture. He reminds me of a hungry lion ready to pounce.

I smile coyly, sliding the spoon back and forth across my glistening lips. “What’s the best part about being a CEO?”

He blinks uncomprehendingly. “Huh?”

I giggle.

“Sorry. I was distracted by what you’re doing with that spoon. I’ve never been so jealous of a fucking piece of silverware.”

I burst out laughing.

With a low chuckle, he reaches over to stroke my knee. “Repeat your question, sweetheart.”

His touch, coupled with the endearment, almost make me forget what we were discussing. “What’s the best part about being a CEO? Besides the money and prestige, of course.”

He considers the question. “Honestly, I think the most rewarding aspect of my job is identifying and nurturing talent,” he says, sounding thoughtful. “Talented, creative employees are absolutely crucial to my company’s survival, so I make it a priority to bring out the best in them. Like Jack Welch famously said, ‘Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.’”

I smile, appreciating his response. “Apparently you don’t just talk the talk; you walk the walk. Your company’s turnover rate is almost nonexistent, and your assistant told me you’re the best boss she’s ever had.”

“Did she now?” He strokes his chin, his eyes gleaming with warm humor. “I’ll have to give her another raise.”

I laugh and eat more ice cream, waving the spoon around at the tiered shelves. “How many of these books have you read?”

“All of them.”

“Every last one?”

“Every last one.” He looks amused. “Does that surprise you?”

“Not really,” I say. “You’re obviously brilliant, cultured and intellectually curious. You speak Mandarin and Farsi, and I read somewhere that you have a genius IQ.”

He chuckles. “Don’t believe everything you read.”

“So you *don't* have a genius IQ?”

His eyes glimmer. “People who boast about their IQ are losers.”

“I—wait. Did you just quote Stephen Hawking while evading a question about being a genius?”

A crooked half smile is all the answer he gives me.

With a deep sigh, I put the spoon down and say, “Well, tomorrow’s Wednesday and we both have to get up early. So I guess we’d better—”

“How do you feel about children?”

The question catches me off guard. “Um, what?”

“Do you like them?” Gunner clarifies.

I smile. “I love children.”

“Do you?”

“Of course. Especially babies,” I add with a grin. “There’s something downright irresistible about their pudgy cheeks, drooly smiles and chubby little thighs. And I love inhaling their sweet baby breath when they yawn. So freaking precious.”

A flicker of tenderness skates over Gunner’s features as he gazes at me. “Do you have a lot of experience with them?”

“With children?”

“Yes.”

“I do. I used to babysit the neighbors’ kids for extra cash. I was good with them, so my services were always in demand.” I tilt my head to one side and grin at him. “Why do I feel like you’re vetting me for a nanny job?”

His mouth curves faintly. “I was just curious.”

“So what about you? Do you like children?”

“I do,” he says warmly. “I have a godson named Walker.”

I smile. “How old is he?”

“He just turned three and he’s a bundle of energy.”

“Aww. He sounds adorable.”

“He is,” Gunner confirms with obvious affection. “His dad’s an old college buddy of mine. He moved back to California after graduation. You can meet him and his wife—and Walker—the next time they’re in town.”

“Looking forward to it.” I give him a teasing smile. “I’m gonna start calling you The Godfather.”

He chuckles, his lashes lowering over his eyes as he studies me. “Do you want children?”

“Eventually,” I say, smile softening. “I want to finish school first and get established in my career.”

“Of course,” he murmurs.

“What about you? You plan on siring any offspring?”

He nods slowly. “When the time is right.”

I find myself picturing him as a father. Stern but loving, overprotective but indulgent. I imagine him being hands-on, helping his children with their homework rather than relying solely on expensive tutors. I picture him down at the dock sanding one of his boats with his son, a miniature version of himself with messy black hair and beautiful blue eyes. I imagine him sitting by a crackling fire with his little girl on his lap, reading her a bedtime story about kickass warrior princesses and—

“Hey.” His voice breaks into my thoughts. “Where’d you go?”

“Sorry.” I swallow an odd lump in my throat and force a laugh. “I was just thinking about how spoiled your kids are gonna be. They’ll attend elite private schools, wear designer clothes, have extravagant birthday parties and travel around the world. They’ll have the best of everything.”

“Maybe,” Gunner quietly concedes. “But all the material possessions in the world won’t matter if I don’t provide them with the most important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“A good mother.”

I stop breathing while his eyes hold mine. There are so many layers to his words, so many possible meanings. Could he be vetting me to see if I'd make a good mother? Is that what's happening here?

My heart is suddenly beating too hard and too fast. I look away, first at a painting on the wall, then down at the carton of ice cream.

“Your midnight snack is melting,” I finally whisper.

“Give me one more taste,” he murmurs.

My hand trembles slightly as I scoop out a dollop of gooey chocolate and offer it to him.

He closes his lips around the spoon, staring at me as a burning heat spreads through my body.

As he releases the spoon from his mouth, my eyes slip downward to the broad expanse of his chest, then further down to the silky fabric of his pants stretched across his thick thighs. My mouth goes dry and I swallow hard.

When he whispers my name, I lift my gaze to his.

The deep, hypnotic blue of his eyes has me swaying toward him before I even realize it.

He meets me halfway, our lips connecting in a kiss so sweetly perfect I think my heart will burst.

It's like something out of a movie, but ten times better.

Fade to black and roll credits ...

Chapter Twenty-Two



GUNNER

I race to the corner of the racquetball court, running down the ball that my brother just hit. Swinging my racquet, I hit a kill shot to end the rally.

“Fuck!” Maverick yells in frustration.

I grin, pointing my racquet at him. “I own you, son.”

He scowls and flips me off.

Chuckling, I pick up the rolling blue ball and toss it to him. “Your serve.”

He wipes sweat from his brow and then smashes the ball with his racquet. It bounces on the floor and ricochets off the back wall before rocketing toward me.

I smack the ball hard and high, sending it hurtling into the front wall.

Maverick misses the return shot and unleashes a string of obscenities that make me laugh.

It’s Thursday afternoon and we’re halfway through the third game of our racquetball match. We play against each other once a week, sometimes more depending on our schedules. It’s a great way to clear our heads, burn off steam and keep the adrenaline pumping during a busy workday. We also enjoy kicking each other’s asses, a time-honored tradition dating back to childhood.

No matter what game we were playing, no matter how high or low the stakes, we always tried our best to dominate each other. We were so fiercely competitive that we often ended up rolling on the ground throwing punches until our father intervened. Torn between laughter and exasperation, he'd pry us apart and make us shake hands. Within five minutes, we'd be laughing and joking again, arms slung around each other's necks.

Nothing can ever destroy the unbreakable bond we forged in our mother's womb. But we both hate to lose and we're so evenly matched that even now, as grown men, a friendly game of racquetball can turn into bloodsport.

Maverick bounces the ball on the hardwood floor, catching his breath. "So how're things going at the love nest?"

"They're good. C'mon, let's fucking go."

We rally back and forth, driving the ball off the front wall and down the sides, sweating and grunting with every shot.

"I've been thinking about that night at the bar," Maverick pants as we wrestle for control of center court.

I backhand the ball. "What night?"

"The night you met Marlowe." His explosive shot thwacks into the side wall.

"What *about* that night?" I grit out.

He grins. "She would've been mine if I'd gotten there first."

My racquet swishes through the air, missing the ball by a mile.

Maverick does a fist pump and laughs.

I glare at him. "Bitch ass."

He laughs harder.

I don't let him gloat for long. Winning the next rally with ease, I smirk at him and crow, "Match point."

His scowl returns with a vengeance. "Serve, asshole."

I bounce the ball and take a swing, smashing a low shot into the back corner that he doesn't reach in time.

“Game, motherfucker!”

Maverick hurls his racquet at a wall in disgust.

Ripping off my soaked shirt, I throw back my head and let out a victory roar that reverberates around the court.

Maverick scowls at me. “I don't know why you're acting like you just won Olympic gold.”

I laugh, slinging my shirt over my shoulder. “Don't be mad 'cause I wiped the floor with your sorry ass.”

“Whatever,” he grumbles. “You caught me on an off day.”

“Uh-huh. Sure,” I taunt, following him off the court.

After toweling off our faces and necks, we stuff our racquets into our bags and chug from our water bottles.

Pantheon's fitness center boasts eight racquetball courts, a basketball court, an Olympic-sized pool, sauna and steam rooms, and a state-of-the-art gym. Our employees are encouraged to utilize the facilities, and most of them do.

Maverick jabs a finger at me. “I want a rematch.”

“No shit.” After an hour of hard play, I could still go a few more rounds. But I've got meetings to attend and a company to run, so Mav will have to exact his revenge another day.

I slap his sweaty back. “Playtime's over. Back to work.”

“Aye, aye, boss.”

We grab our gym bags and head for the nearby elevators. After our matches, we prefer to shower and change in our private bathrooms so we can dive right back into work.

On the way to the elevators, we pass the glass-fronted gym full of people diligently sweating their way through lunchtime workouts. It's hard to miss the hot black girl in thong leggings doing squats on a Smith machine.

She spots us walking by and smiles flirtatiously. Maverick winks at her.

When he seems inclined to linger, I give him a hard shoulder check to keep him moving.

He lets out a low wolf whistle. “Holy shit. Did you see the ass on that babe?”

“Jesus,” I mutter in disgust. “You’re the COO and joint owner of this building. Show some decorum.”

He laughs unabashedly. “I know you’re spoken for, bro, but don’t expect me to believe you didn’t peep that big ass booty.”

Arriving at the bank of elevators, I swipe my keycard to access the restricted top floor. “I saw it.”

Maverick grins. “And?”

My lips twitch. “What do you want me to say? It was a nice ass.”

Maverick chuckles fiendishly and bumps his shoulder against mine.

During the elevator ride up to our floor, we pull out our phones to check for missed calls or messages. My screen is filled with notifications, but I zero in on three texts from Marlowe.

The first one reads: **Hope you’re having a wonderful day.**

The simple message with the heart emoji makes me grin like a schoolboy experiencing his first crush.

The second message reads: **This was us last night.**

There’s a picture attached, an image of a couple sitting across from each other with a candlelit birthday cake glowing between them. I recognize the popular shot from *Sixteen Candles*, an old eighties flick with Molly Ringwald and some guy whose name I couldn’t tell you without googling it.

A warm laugh escapes me when I see that Marlowe photoshopped our faces onto the actors’ bodies.

“Aww,” Maverick coos, reading over my shoulder. He makes an obnoxious smooching noise and singsongs, “Gunner

and Marlowe sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g—”

“Fuck off.” But I’m grinning. I can’t help myself.

This thing with Marlowe ... I don’t even know how to define it. The way I feel about her is uncharted territory. I’d kill for her without batting an eye. I’d die for her. Rot in a Siberian prison for her.

I’m absolutely and totally addicted. She’s like a drug pumped into my veins, flooding my bloodstream and jolting my heart in the most intense thrill rush.

I can’t get enough of her, and I don’t know if I ever will.

Which means I’m eternally, royally fucked.

Leaning back against the elevator wall, I respond to her messages: **Can’t wait to come home to you ...**

I hover over the send button, just for a few seconds, no more than five. Then I punch it with my finger and glance over at my brother. He’s texting on his phone, thumbs flying over the keypad.

“Mav.”

He grunts distractedly.

“I need you to hold down the fort for a few days. Think you can handle that?”

“Don’t I always?”

I nod. “Point taken.”

He looks at me, one brow cocked. “You going somewhere?”

I gaze down at my phone screen, tracing Marlowe’s beautiful face with my finger.

“Yeah,” I murmur almost to myself. “I’m going somewhere.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



MARLOWE

I WAKE UP ALONE ON FRIDAY morning.

The other side of my bed is empty, the pillow dented where Gunner's head had lain. I reach out and run my hand slowly across the soft mound. It's cool to the touch, which means he's been gone for a while.

Feeling achingly bereft, I sit up in bed and push my tousled hair out of my face. That's when I see a note lying on the nightstand. Puzzled, I reach over and pick it up, smiling at Gunner's bold, masculine handwriting.

Kitten,

Had to run to an early meeting. You were sleeping so soundly I didn't have the heart to wake you. I'm taking you away for the weekend, so you need to pack a bag. I picked out a few things for you to wear. Hope you like them. We're leaving at 10, so be ready. See you soon.

Yours,

^ -

G.R.

I squeal with excitement, the sound echoing around the room.

Laughing at myself, I clutch the note to my chest, my heart bursting with happiness and another emotion I'm not inclined to analyze at the moment.

Grinning from ear to ear, I fling back the covers and race to the walk-in closet. My jaw drops when I see stacks of glossy black boxes on the dressing bench.

"A *few* things?" I exclaim in disbelief.

The first three boxes are filled with expensive lingerie from La Perla. I softly caress the delicate bits of silk and lace, thrilled and aroused by the thought of Gunner selecting such sexy underthings for me.

Did he picture me in the see-through bras and panties? Did it turn him on? Just the thought makes me shiver in anticipation.

The other boxes hold an array of designer skirts, blouses, pants and sundresses, all in my size. There are also several shoeboxes containing strappy sandals, nude pumps and jewel-encrusted heels. Louis Vuitton. Jimmy Choo. Christian Louboutin.

I shake my head incredulously. When did Gunner find time to go on an extravagant shopping spree?

Grinning dazedly, I pull a garment bag off the rack, unzip it and remove an evening gown that makes me gasp.

The dress is a stunning shade of red. It's made of silk with a fitted bodice, plunging neckline and an open back. It's glamorous, sexy and outrageously expensive.

When I see the designer's name sewn inside, I almost pass out. Zuhair Murad! No freaking way!

Shimmying with excitement, I hold the dress up against my body and stare at my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. It's

the most beautiful dress I've ever owned. Like something you'd see at a red carpet movie premiere.

Hearing a knock on the door, I spin from the mirror with a slightly panicked expression. Despite Gunner's insistence that Mrs. Calder knows about our affair, I'm not comfortable with having it all out in the open. What if she thinks less of me? What if she thinks I'm hopelessly naïve, or worse, an opportunistic gold digger?

I carefully drape the dress over the back of an accent chair, then step from the closet and call out, "Come in."

Mrs. Calder enters the room with Sansa trailing at her heels. "Good morning, dear. Gunner says you were up late studying, so he wanted me to make sure you don't oversleep."

"Nope. I'm up."

"I see that." There's a sparkle in her eyes. "Have you started packing?"

"Um, not yet." I hesitate, staring at her. "You know about the trip?"

"Of course, dear. But don't ask me where you're going. It's a surprise."

I break into a silly grin.

"Since he won't be here, Gunner gave the rest of us the weekend off. So Mr. Leland is visiting his family in Houston, and I'm joining my eldest daughter and her family at Lake Tahoe. I'd like to take Sansa with me, if that's all right with you."

"Of course," I say without hesitation.

Mrs. Calder smiles. "My grandchildren are going to love her."

"Like their grandma," I point out teasingly. "And to think I was worried that you hated cats."

"Heavens, no. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"During my interview, you practically recoiled in horror when I mentioned having a cat."

“Did I?” She sighs. “I was probably thinking of Gunner. He’s always been adamantly opposed to having pets in the house. You were my top candidate, and I was afraid owning a cat would disqualify you. But here you are, both of you. So all’s well that ends well, right?”

“Definitely,” I agree, returning her smile.

“Now then,” she says, clapping her hands together. “May I see your dress?”

“Absolutely!”

She follows me into the closet, where I carefully pick up the haute couture dress and hug it close to my heart. “Isn’t it gorgeous?”

“Very.” She beams approval.

“I can’t believe I’m holding an actual Zuhair Murad dress,” I exclaim. “He’s a world-famous fashion designer! Celebrities wear his gowns to the Oscars and the Met Gala. You can’t just walk into a store and buy one off the rack.”

“I know,” Mrs. Calder says with a twinkling smile. “Gunner happens to be friends with Zuhair, so he had the dress specially made for you.” She pauses. “That was shortly after you started working here. Make of that what you will.”

I’m positively floored. “How did he even get my measurements?”

“I had them on file for ordering your uniform.” She gives the red dress another once-over, her smile widening with admiration. “Gunner’s going to swallow his tongue when he sees you in this.”

I laugh softly as Sansa leaps onto the bench to sniff at pink tissue paper spilling out of a box.

“Thank you for taking such good care of my baby, Mrs. Calder. I’ve been meaning to tell you that.”

She waves off my gratitude. “I enjoy her company. I haven’t had a cat in my life since my Ginger passed away ten years ago. Sansa’s been good for me.”

I smile, touched by her words. “She likes you very much, in case it wasn’t obvious. She follows you everywhere, and she prefers sleeping with you over me.”

Mrs. Calder chuckles, fondly scratching behind the cat’s ears. “She still loves you. She just knows she has to share you from now on.”

My cheeks heat with a blush. I turn away to face the mirror, staring at my reflection for a long moment. “I didn’t want this to happen,” I whisper before I can stop myself.

“Didn’t want what, dear?”

“This ... relationship with Gunner. I didn’t plan it. In fact, I fought it as hard as I could. But ...”

Mrs. Calder’s reflection joins mine in the mirror, her eyes soft with understanding. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

I swallow hard, feeling exposed. “Do you ... do you think I’m making a mistake?”

“A mistake?”

“Getting involved with my boss. Do you think it’s wrong?”

Her expression gentles. “That’s not for me to decide.” She purses her lips, searching my troubled face in the mirror. “What I *will* tell you is that I’ve never seen him like this before. He’s more relaxed and lighthearted—two words no one would *ever* use to describe Gunner Ransom. He wore jeans to work this week, and the other morning I overheard him whistling while running on the treadmill. I honestly can’t remember the last time he dropped everything and ran off for the weekend.” Her eyes twinkle warmly. “You’re clearly the inspiration behind his sudden spontaneity, Marlowe. You make him happy, and something tells me the feeling is mutual.”

“It is,” I whisper. “Definitely.”

She smiles. “Then I see nothing wrong with your relationship, and neither should you.” She tucks an arm around my shoulders and gives me a gentle squeeze. “Now you’d

better get ready before he comes home. Changed man or not, he hates to be kept waiting.”

I laugh. “So true.”

I’M PACKED AND READY TWO HOURS later when Gunner strides through the front door, casually dressed in a loose white shirt and tan slacks. He’s on the phone, radiating power and impatience as he speaks in a terse tone.

I’m sitting on the bottom step of the staircase. Sansa is curled up in my lap, dozing off and on.

The tension in Gunner’s face seems to soften when his gaze lands on us. As he walks over, Sansa flicks her tail and starts purring shamelessly. He strokes her head while gazing down at me with an approving glint in his eyes. I’m wearing one of the outfits he bought me, a flirty yellow sundress that shows off my bare shoulders and legs.

“I’ll be out of town and unavailable until Monday,” he grits into the phone. “I expect the matter to be resolved before I return. No fucking excuses.” He ends the call and unclenches his jaw, then leans down to press his lips to my forehead. “Sorry about that. We’re having some delays with the expansion project.”

I feel a pang of guilt. “Maybe it’s not a good time for you to—”

He silences me with a hard kiss, his tongue sweeping inside to tangle with mine. As I let out a throaty moan, he threads his fingers through my hair and whispers against my mouth, “I’ve been dying to get you all to myself this weekend. Wild fucking horses couldn’t stop me from boarding that plane with you.”

My stomach flips at his words. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

He kisses me again. “Let’s go.”

We say our goodbyes to everyone and head out the door. While Trace loads our luggage into the car, I slide into the backseat. Gunner climbs in beside me, his hard muscular thigh pressing against mine. The heat radiating from his body burns

through my dress and tightens my nipples. I don't know where we're going, but when we get there I'm jumping his bones.

What can I say? I'm addicted.

As we set off for the airport, Gunner reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together on his thigh.

I give him a coy smile. "You're a man of many secrets, Mr. Ransom. When did you plan this surprise getaway?"

"Probably the night I met you."

I choke out a laugh. "Come again?"

"Maybe not that night, but shortly after." He smiles enigmatically, watching my eyes to gauge my reaction to his words. I can't tell if he's serious or not, but my heart beats faster just the same.

"Leaving yesterday would have given us more time together, of course. But I didn't want you to miss class." Keeping his eyes on mine, he brings our joined hands to his mouth and brushes his lips across my knuckles, sending little tingles down my spine.

"Did you like the red dress?" he murmurs.

"Are you kidding? It's absolutely stunning," I gush breathlessly. "I can't believe you had a dress made for me! A *Zuhair Murad* dress!"

He chuckles. "It never hurts to have famous friends."

"I bet," I say with a grin. "I love *everything* you bought me, including the sexy lingerie. You have outstanding taste."

His eyes glimmer. "Can't wait to see you in it."

"The dress? Or the lingerie?"

He leans close to whisper in my ear, "Both."

Delicious heat curls through my body, pulsing between my legs. His bones are *definitely* getting jumped tonight.

"So," I say in a breathy voice, "where are you taking me?"

"Kauai," he responds. "I have a home there."

I gasp in shock. “We’re going to *Hawaii*?”

“We are.” He’s smiling. “Ever visited?”

“No, but I’ve always wanted to!” Overcome with excitement, I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him soundly on the mouth.

He laughs, warm and husky.

“This is so awesome! You’re the best boyfriend *ever!*” The moment the words leave my mouth, I realize my mistake and blush furiously. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to call you that. I just ... I mean ...” I’m floundering, adrift on a sea of doubt and trying to find the right words to rescue myself. “I know we haven’t defined our relationship—”

He leans in and kisses me, cutting off my words. “Don’t overthink this,” he whispers against my mouth. “Let’s just enjoy our weekend together, just the two of us. We can worry about labels later.”

I stare into his eyes, then swallow thickly and nod.

When his phone rings, he pulls it out of his pocket and swears under his breath before sending me an apologetic look. “I have to take this.”

“No problem,” I say, smiling. “I’ll just sit here fantasizing about sunny beaches and mai tais.”

He winks at me before bringing the phone to his ear. He talks business until we reach the airport, where we board his custom Gulfstream.

I’ve never been on a private jet and have only flown first class once in my life. So I’m dazzled by the sheer opulence of the cream leather seats, burl wood accents and multi-entertainment screens. There’s also a kitchen, bedroom and an executive lounge for meetings.

“Wow,” I marvel after a quick tour. “This is like a five-star hotel on wheels.”

Gunner chuckles behind me. “Sit wherever you want.”

I choose a window seat, and he settles into the chair next to me. The uber-luxurious plane is another reminder that we're different people from different worlds.

Once we're airborne, a smiling flight attendant serves us drinks and lunch. After enjoying the tasty meal, I recline in my plush seat, a blissful sigh slipping from my lips. Flying coach after this is going to be a serious downgrade.

I turn my head to look at Gunner. He appears lazy and relaxed, long fingers stroking the stem of his martini glass as he watches me with hooded eyes. Being the sole focus of such a gorgeous, powerful man is insanely intoxicating.

"How long is the flight?" I ask.

"Eight hours," he says. "We've got lots of time to kill. Do you want to watch a movie?"

"Hmm. Not really."

"What about cards? I can teach you how to play Texas Hold'em."

I grin at him. "You know how to play poker?"

He gives me a wry look. "My dad is a recovering gambler."

"Right." I bite my lip at the reminder, eyeing him ruefully. "Maybe we can play later."

"If you want." He finishes his dirty martini, picks an olive out of the glass and brings it to my lips.

I take it into my mouth, watching his eyes darken as my lips close around his fingers. I chew the gin-soaked olive as we stare at each other, the air between us sizzling with sexual awareness.

"Good?" he murmurs.

"Delicious."

His sexy smile sends a burst of heat to my pelvis. I squeeze my thighs together, watching as he slowly licks his fingers, tasting traces of me with the liquor.

“So what’re you in the mood for, Miss Somerset?”

“Mmm. I have a couple ideas.”

His gaze dips to my mouth. I wonder if he wants to kiss me as badly as I want to kiss him.

“I’m listening,” he prompts.

Holding his gaze, I rise slowly to my feet and lean down to whisper against his mouth, “I’ll tell you when I get back from the restroom.”

As I pull away, he gives me a darkly seductive smile and warns, “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



GUNNER

I WATCH MARLOWE STROLL TOWARD THE back of the plane, her bouncy round ass swaying in a mesmerizing motion that makes my dick throb.

When she reaches the door to the rear cabin, she pauses and looks over her shoulder at me. As I watch, she provocatively slides the tip of her tongue over those puffy pink lips.

I'm up and out of my seat in a flash, striding down the aisle to follow her through the cabin door. She grins at me, her beautiful hazel eyes sparkling with mischief as she takes my hand and leads me past the bathroom and into the executive lounge.

I close the door behind us and slowly back her up toward the conference table, fingering the strap of her sundress. "What're you up to, naughty girl?"

Rising on tiptoe, she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me. Electricity rockets through my body, jolting into every nerve. As she explores the inside of my mouth with her silky tongue, my cock strains against my slacks.

Groaning with need, I run my hands up her sides and brush her breasts with my thumbs.

She shivers and moans against my lips, the sound vibrating down my spine.

As the kiss grows hotter and wetter, I slide my hands under her dress and cup the fleshy curves of her ass. I'm so fucking hard, and her body is so damn soft.

"Fuck, sweetheart," I whisper against her mouth. "I want you so bad right now."

"I want you, too," she whispers back.

I lift her onto the table and stand between her legs. She looks so damn sexy with her lush tits spilling over the cups of her dress, the skirt ruffled around her thighs.

I stroke her knees, pushing the hem higher as I trail my fingers up her legs. Her skin feels like warm silk and smells of wild strawberries.

When I caress the inside of her thighs, her breath catches and her legs open wider.

I groan when I see her red panties. "You're wearing the new lingerie."

"Sure am," she says in a throaty purr that has me nearly coming in my slacks.

The silk panties are so sheer I can see her pussy lips. Money well spent? Most definitely.

Holding her half-lidded gaze, I cup my hand over her warm cunt and am rewarded with a full-body shiver.

"You're too fucking beautiful, Marlowe," I whisper, skimming my lips across her ear. "I'm so addicted to you."

"That goes both ways," she whispers, smiling.

Kneeling in front of her, I ease her sexy panties to the side and stare at the glistening pink folds of her pussy.

She starts trembling. "Gunner ..."

"God, you're so pretty here." I spread her plump lips with my fingers, then lean forward and taste her honeyed slickness.

She cries out, her thighs clenching in response.

A rumbling growl escapes me before I grab the delicate silk of her panties and rip them clean off.

“Hey! Those were brand ne—*ohhh*,” she moans as I seal my mouth over her pussy, plunging my tongue into her soaking heat. She tastes incredible, like luscious fruit and fresh rainwater.

I drag her to the edge of the table, throw her legs over my shoulders and bury my face between her thighs.

She releases a drawn-out moan, leaning back on her elbows with her head flung back. I love seeing her like this, utterly exposed and at my complete mercy. I could spend all day and night eating her out, listening to her breathy sounds of pleasure.

“Your pussy is so wet. So fucking sweet.” I slide my tongue through her slick folds and she sobs my name, her thighs trembling on my shoulders. My blood is on fire, and my dick is so hard it’s downright painful.

Groaning, I circle her clit with my tongue before taking it into my mouth and sucking firmly.

She keens in ecstasy, her arms quivering behind her as she grinds her pussy against my face.

I grab her thighs, my fingers digging into her flesh as I sweep my tongue up and down her slit, licking every part of her I can reach.

“Gunner,” she pants breathlessly. “Oh, my God.”

I close my eyes, losing myself in the wonders of her succulent body.

Her orgasm tears through her like a rocket. I feel the intensity of it in her quaking legs, her pulsing flesh against my mouth, her mewling cry. I keep licking and sucking her, swallowing her hot juices down my throat, feeding my bottomless craving.

When she slumps back onto the table, I lower her legs from over my shoulders and stand up. Leaning over her, I kiss her with her taste on my tongue and her scent burned into my brain.

She lets out a soft little sigh, her eyes glazed and her cheeks flushed as she kisses me back, sucking on my bottom lip.

With shaking hands, I unbuckle my belt and unzip my fly, shoving my slacks down with my boxer briefs. Marlowe sits up and takes my hard cock in her hand, smiling at my low hiss of pleasure.

She strokes me from base to tip, rubbing the painfully sensitive head and smearing clear beads of precum. I shudder against her, watching her slender hand pump me slowly while she looks up at me through her lashes, biting her lip in that sexy way of hers.

When I can't take any more of her sweet torture, I pull her hand off my cock and replace it with my own. She wraps one leg around my hip as I guide my shaft to her opening, sinking just the tip inside.

"Please, Gunner," she whimpers.

"God, I love the sound of my name on your lips." Unable to hold back another second, I plunge into her delicious wetness, burying my cock to the root.

"Yes," she moans brokenly. "Oh God, *yes!*"

I pull almost all the way out of her and then slam back in, groaning as she arches back with a throaty cry, the skin on her chest flushing pink.

I wrap my hand around her other leg and draw them both around my waist. She crosses her ankles behind my back, her nails biting into my biceps as I slide deeper inside, grinding against her clit.

"*Oh baby ...*" she groans.

I bend to kiss her, swirling my tongue around hers as I thrust in and out of her. Slowly at first, gradually picking up the pace as she begs for more.

"I can't get enough of your tight little cunt," I whisper into her mouth. "You feel so fucking incredible, so hot and wet and made just for me."

“Yes,” she breathes. “I was made for you. Only you.”

Her words inflame me, triggering every primal instinct in my body. I begin pounding into her, every thrust punctuated by a savage grunt of satisfaction.

She reaches behind her and grips the edge of the table for support, holding on for dear life. “Oh shit, Gunner. Just like that. *Just like that.*”

My balls tighten as the first pulses of her orgasm begin, squeezing my cock in a white-hot vise. I thrust harder, wildly intoxicated by the stream of erotic noises falling from her lips.

“Oh God, I’m com—”

I crush my mouth to hers, swallowing her cries as her body tightens and her legs shake. And then she’s keening my name and spasming around my cock.

“That’s it, baby. Oh fuck,” I groan, slamming between her thighs until I explode, my hips jerking with every spurt of cum jetting into her warmth.

At that exact moment, we hit a small pocket of turbulence that rocks the plane. Marlowe lets out an adorable little squeak as I brace my legs to maintain balance, holding her securely against me.

My pilot’s soothing voice comes over the loudspeaker, apologizing for the rough patch and promising to deliver us safely to our destination.

Marlowe isn’t entirely reassured. “Um, how much do you trust that guy?”

I chuckle, my lips nuzzling her damp hairline as she clings to my neck. “He’s one of the most experienced pilots in the world, and he’s been with me for years. It’s not his fault our lovemaking sent shockwaves into the stratosphere.”

She lets out a breathy laugh and tilts her head back to look at me. Her eyes are hazy with satisfaction, her lips cherry red and swollen. “Crashing to earth right after an epic orgasm sounds almost poetic.”

“It’d be one hell of a way to go out, that’s for sure.” I grin at her. “Epic, huh?”

She smiles. “Life-altering.”

Tenderness rushes through me. Tenderness and lust. Hell of a combination.

She glances out the oval window at the fluffy white clouds floating by. “I’ve never had sex on a plane before.”

This pleases me way more than it should. “I’m glad your first time was with me.”

Her gaze returns to mine. “Me, too,” she says, smiling almost shyly.

I frame her face with my hands and lean down, brushing a featherlight kiss across her mouth as I murmur, “The last time this conference room was used, I was meeting with a group of Bangladeshi executives to hammer out the details of a licensing deal.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I smile against her lips. “I’ll never look at this table again without getting hard as a rock.”

She laughs, her cheeks pinking. “That could be a problem.”

“You think?” I tease, pulling up my pants. As I lift her off the table, she wraps her arms and legs around me. I hug her body close to mine, feeling an overwhelming desire to protect her. Cherish her. Worship her.

Scary. Very fucking scary.

As I carry her out the door, she asks teasingly, “Where are we going?”

“The bedroom,” I rumble. “We’ve got several hours to kill, and I know the perfect way to do it.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



MARLOWE

WE ARRIVE ON THE ISLAND OF Kauai early afternoon local time. As we deplane, a chauffeured Maserati is waiting on the tarmac along with a black SUV containing Gunner's security detail.

Wearing colorful leis around our necks, we set off for his vacation home. I spend most of the ride with my face pressed to the window, awed by the sparkling blue ocean, sculptured green mountains, cascading waterfalls and endless stretches of golden sand beach.

We travel along a narrow highway that hugs the coastline. Thirty minutes later, the car turns onto a mountain road lined with swaying palm trees. After a mile or so, we pass through a gated entrance and drive past acres of manicured green grass. At the top of the hill stands a sprawling white stucco mansion.

I suck in a breath, grabbing Gunner's arm as if he's never seen the property before. He chuckles softly against my hair.

The stunning mansion sits on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It's surrounded by lush tropical gardens with a fountain at the center of the circular drive.

As we pull into the courtyard fronting the house, the estate manager and two of his staff members stand ready to greet us.

When we emerge from the car, Gunner shakes hands with the manager and introduces him to me as David Kapono.

“Aloha,” says the fortysomething Hawaiian man, his dark eyes as warm as his smile. “Welcome to Kauai.”

“Thank you,” I say, beaming. “I’m thrilled to be here.”

“Is this your first visit to our beautiful island?”

“It is.”

“But it won’t be her last,” Gunner says.

My heart skips two beats. When I look at him, he winks at me.

As the servants retrieve our luggage, Gunner guides me up the wide stone steps and into an entrance hall that could double as a luxurious hotel lobby. The floors are white marble, the domed ceiling has a skylight, and two curved staircases rise to the second floor.

“Wow,” I breathe in awe.

Gunner smiles. “Let me give you a tour.”

Boasting nine bedrooms, the mansion has soaring ceilings, beautiful tile work and high-end furnishings. Tall glass windows let in tons of natural light, blurring the lines between inside and outside. Warm earth tones abound, and every room commands an ocean view.

“As if your house back home isn’t amazing enough,” I marvel as we stand on the balcony off the master suite. From here we can see the whole estate spread out below. It spans two hundred acres dotted with palm and banyan trees and lush vegetation. Besides the main residence, there are two guest cottages, a greenhouse, a tennis court, and a private beach and lagoon.

“Do you vacation here often?” I ask Gunner.

“Not as often as I should.”

“Because you’re a workaholic,” I say half teasingly.

“I am,” he admits. “I enjoy making money. The harder I work, the more I earn.”

“And that’s important to you.”

He nods slowly. “I don’t need money to be happy. I need the security and control that come with having it.”

“Because of your father,” I say quietly. “His gambling cost your family more than money. It stole your peace and sense of security.”

The subtle tightening of his jaw confirms my assessment.

In a low voice, he says, “After we lost everything, I swore that when I grew up, I’d never be that vulnerable again. It made me feel scared and powerless, and I never wanted to get used to that.” He looks out over his island estate. “So I didn’t.”

I study his profile, absorbing his words. I’m understanding him a little more each day, and it makes me feel closer to him. But I want even more.

“Come on,” he says, shaking off his dark mood and reaching for my hand. “Let’s go check out the backyard.”

He leads me downstairs and out onto a black slate terrace overlooking the ocean. The sprawling lawn is beautifully landscaped with tropical plants, and a black-bottomed infinity pool winks in the sunlight.

“God. This is so amazing.” With a thrill, I skip down the terrace steps, my sandals snapping against my heels.

Gunner follows slowly, enjoying my girlish enthusiasm as I race ahead. “Don’t go too far,” he calls after me. “It’s a helluva steep drop to the bottom.”

I laugh but wisely heed his warning, stopping several yards from the edge of the cliff. Warm trade winds blow through my hair and whip my dress around my knees as I stare out across the ocean, listening to the waves crash on the rocks below. I can’t believe I’m actually in Hawaii. I want to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming.

Tilting my head back, I take deep breaths of the fresh tropical air and savor the Hawaiian sun on my face.

“Is this paradise or what?” Breathless and giddy, I look over my shoulder to see Gunner snapping a picture of me with his phone.

When I poke my tongue out at him, he grins and snaps another photo.

I stretch my arms wide and twirl around with my head back, the blues of the ocean and sky blurring together.

Gunner lowers his phone, staring at me with a transfixed expression. “Jesus, you’re beautiful.”

Grinning, I push my windswept hair off my face and run to him, flinging my arms around his neck.

He laughs, lifting me off my feet and swinging me around as I squeal ecstatically.

When he sets me back down, I tighten my arms around his neck and rise on tiptoe to whisper against his lips, “Thank you for bringing me here.”

He kisses me softly, staring into my eyes as he whispers back, “Thank you for coming.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon sunbathing, frolicking in the surf and drinking mai tais. After showering together, we eat dinner on the lanai and watch the breathtaking Hawaiian sunset.

As the last of the golden sun disappears from the horizon, we head upstairs to our room and fall into bed. Even with exhaustion tugging at our limbs, we still reach for each other, mouths connecting, hands exploring. We make love slowly, sensually, the scent of jasmine wafting over us.

Afterward we fall asleep twined together, leaving the balcony doors open to enjoy the ocean breeze.

WE KICK OFF THE NEXT DAY ziplining through a tropical rainforest. It’s a terrifying but exhilarating experience, soaring over a lush canopy of trees with the beautiful Ha‘upu Mountains looming above. I scream myself hoarse while Gunner laughs at me.

After enjoying a beachside picnic lunch, we go swimming at a waterfall pool tucked away in the forest. We’re completely alone, not another soul in sight.

One moment we're laughing and splashing each other. The next moment we're kissing, his hands slicking back my hair as his tongue tangles wetly with mine. Then he's removing my bikini top, palming my naked breasts and sucking my nipples, making me moan. He pulls the string on the side of my bikini bottom, and when it slips away, he wraps my legs around his hips and thrusts into me. My piercing cry is drowned out by the roar of the waterfall.

If I had a bucket list of unforgettable places to have sex, a tropical waterfall would rank right up there at the top.

We're still grinning at each other an hour later when we climb into his Bentley Bentayga. Today was the first time I'd ever seen him drive, and I'd found myself getting massively turned on as I watched him. He'd looked right at home off-roading through the forest, skillfully handling the rugged terrain as wind from the open sunroof ruffled his hair.

"I thought you were exaggerating about your thrill-seeking ways," I tease now as he taps the SUV's keyless ignition. "Turns out there really *is* an adrenaline junkie lurking beneath those million-dollar suits."

He slants me a grin, his teeth flashing white against his dark stubble. His damp T-shirt clings to his powerful shoulders and muscular chest. He's all kinds of hot, sexy manliness. And for the next day and a half, I have him all to myself.

"You keep staring at me like that and I'm carrying you back to that waterfall for round two," he warns.

I laugh and reach over to run my fingers through his wet hair, marveling at the silky texture.

He lets the engine run, his eyes roaming over every inch of my body not covered by my cropped T-shirt and skimpy shorts. "You're tanning beautifully," he murmurs.

"So are you."

He captures my hand and brings it to his lips, kissing my fingers one by one. "I scheduled a spa treatment for you at three o'clock. Herbal body wrap, mud bath, manicure, pedicure, massage. The works."

“Oh my,” I say, thoroughly delighted. “That was very generous of you. And what will *you* be doing while I enjoy this world-class pampering?”

“I need to take care of some last minute details.”

“For ... ?”

His eyes gleam. “I have a special evening planned.”

A warm glow of pleasure spreads through me. “You’re spoiling me rotten,” I tell him with a soft smile.

He leans over and gives me a toe-curling kiss, murmuring against my lips, “I’m just getting started.”

Chapter Twenty-Six



MARLOWE

AFTER THREE HOURS OF PAMPERING, I'M ready for my big date night with Gunner.

My exfoliated skin feels like silk and my nails are beautifully manicured. My hair and makeup are flawless, thanks to the talented stylist Gunner hired. My dark tresses are artfully piled on top of my head and secured with sparkly silver combs.

My couture evening gown clings to my curves and reveals plenty of cleavage. The back is equally daring, dipping all the way down to the base of my spine. When I walk, a slit up the side shows off my leg from ankle to thigh. The gown's vibrant red color matches my lipstick and makes my hazel eyes pop.

Completing the ensemble are glittery stilettos and a pair of dangling diamond earrings that Gunner surprised me with last night.

I barely recognize my reflection in the mirror. I've never looked so glamorous in my life. I feel like Cinderella going to the ball.

When I emerge from the room to find Prince Charming waiting at the bottom of the staircase, my breath catches in my throat.

Leaning casually against the wall, he's heart-stoppingly handsome in a fitted black tux with his thick hair combed back from his face. He looks good enough to devour.

As I put my hand on the railing, he glances up. His eyes widen when he sees me. As he slowly pushes away from the wall, butterflies take flight in my stomach.

He watches me descend the stairs with a look of such possessive ferocity it's a miracle my skin doesn't melt right off my bones.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, he slowly looks me over from head to toe.

"You look ..." He shakes his head wonderingly. "*Breathtaking* doesn't begin to capture it."

The man has a way of turning my insides to complete mush. "Thank you," I say, smiling shyly. "You don't look too bad yourself."

His lips curve as he treats me to another leisurely perusal, lingering on my cleavage before meeting my eyes again. "Exquisite."

His blatant admiration makes me feel gorgeous and powerful, an intoxicating combination.

"Come." His hand trails along my bare back, sending delicious shivers through my body. He steers me out the front door, where a black Maybach limo is waiting at the base of the steps with his estate manager.

David gives me an appreciative smile. "You look very lovely, Miss Somerset."

"Thank you," I say shyly.

"Told you," Gunner whispers against my ear, palming my hip possessively as he guides me toward the limo.

David opens the back door for us with an elegant flourish. "Enjoy your evening."

The driver takes us to a fancy restaurant nestled on a bluff overlooking the coast. The tuxedoed maître d' greets Gunner effusively and escorts us to a private glass elevator that whisks us up to the top floor.

When the doors open, I let out a soft gasp.

Huge wraparound windows provide a panoramic view of the ocean. There are illuminated trees and the walls are covered with moss. I feel like we just stepped into an enchanted forest. The atmosphere is so romantic that I nearly swoon at Gunner's feet.

The maître d' guides us to a candlelit table by the windows. We're the only two diners on the entire floor.

Seconds after we're seated, a waiter and sommelier arrive to take our order. Gunner selects a delicate Chablis from the wine cellar. I'm too excited to focus on the menu, so I let him choose our entrées as well.

"This place is amazing," I rave once we're alone. "How did you get reservations on such short notice? Or do I even have to ask?"

He smiles enigmatically. "I have my ways."

I stare at him as comprehension dawns. "Don't tell me you own the restaurant."

"Okay. I won't tell you."

"Seriously?" I laugh, shaking my head at him. "Tech and energy companies. Restaurants. Hotels. Nightclubs. You really believe in diversifying your portfolio, don't you?"

"Something like that." His eyes hold mine, sending warm tingles along my skin. "You look absolutely ravishing, Marlowe. I can't take my eyes off you."

Deep satisfaction curls through my veins. "I feel like a goddess in this dress."

"You are a goddess," he says huskily. "And you're mine."

His words electrify me, causing my breath to hitch. Every fiber of my being knows what he said is the truth. I *am* his. His and his alone.

With soft music playing in the background, we dine on raw oysters and grilled mahi mahi prepared tableside. The meal is delicious and the ambience is dreamy perfection.

We savor our food, laughing and talking quietly as warm candlelight dances across our faces.

“What were you like in high school?” Gunner asks over dessert.

“Pretty much the same as I am now.”

“So, a smartass?”

At my narrowed eyes, he laughs low in his throat.

I smile before eating a forkful of guava chiffon cake, enjoying the tangy flavor of the Hawaiian dessert. “Seriously though, I was an introvert in high school. I mean, I had a few close friends that I hung out with, but I generally preferred my own company.”

“What about your sister? Aren’t you two close?”

“Very close. We did everything together. But she’s three years older than me, so she had her own friends and social life. She was captain of the debate team and a star volleyball player, so she was pretty popular.”

Gunner smiles, watching me lick a spot of icing off my fork. “What about you? What extracurricular activities were you involved in?”

“I played piano for our school’s jazz ensemble. When we weren’t performing recitals, I volunteered at the library and local animal shelters.”

“Yeah?” The way Gunner hangs on my every word warms me from the inside out like fine whiskey.

“A typical Saturday for me was leading story time at the library and then helping with pet adoption events,” I add, smiling.

He feeds me a bite of his cake, staring at my mouth. “What about boyfriends?”

“What about them?”

“Did you date a lot?”

“Not exactly,” I wryly admit. “I was picky, so I didn’t give many guys a chance. That’s why I only had three boyfriends in high school, and none were serious relationships.”

“Good,” Gunner grumbles.

I raise an eyebrow. “Good?”

“As I’ve told you, I hate the thought of you being with other men. The fewer boyfriends you had, the better.”

I can only laugh at him.

When we’ve eaten the last crumbs of guava cake, the waiter clears our plates and pours us more wine. We raise our glasses and clink to nothing in particular, simply gazing into each other’s eyes, suspended in a perfect moment beyond which nothing else exists.

“I don’t want this night to end,” I whisper to Gunner. “Can you make it last forever?”

He smiles softly. “That’s the plan.”

WE HOLD HANDS ON THE RIDE back to the estate.

When we arrive, he helps me out of the limo. “I have a surprise for you,” he says with a mysterious gleam in his eyes.

My pulse leaps with excitement. “What is it?”

“You’ll see.” Keeping our hands joined, he leads me around the side of the mansion toward the back terrace. As we walk, the ocean breeze blows over us like a whisper. The night smells of jasmine, tangy sea and magic.

As we near the end of the stone path, my eyes widen in shock.

A full orchestra has been set up on an elaborate stage on the lawn. The musicians are formally dressed, quietly tuning their instruments.

I stare incredulously at Gunner. “How ... when ... ?”

He’s smiling at me. “I promised to take you to see the Austin Symphony. Since their regular season doesn’t start for another few weeks, I decided to bring them to you.”

“Wait. You mean ...” As my stunned gaze shoots from his face to the orchestra, I clap my hand over my mouth. “Oh, my God! I can’t believe you flew the Austin Symphony to Hawaii to perform for me!”

He grins, enjoying my reaction. “The conductor is a good friend of mine. He owed me a favor, and he wasn’t about to deprive his musicians of an all-expenses-paid trip to paradise.”

I throw my arms around his neck with an ecstatic squeal. He laughs as he returns my hug, lifting my feet off the ground.

When he sets me back down, I gush breathlessly, “Thank you for everything, Gunner. This has been so amazing. *All* of it.”

He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses the back. “I love making you smile.”

I beam at him before we start across the lawn, our way lit by flaming torches lining the walkways. As we near the stage, the musicians grin broadly at me.

I feel like the luckiest girl alive. I mean, what could be more romantic than a private outdoor concert on a beautiful tropical island?

Gunner leads me to a high-backed bench beneath a canopy of bougainvillea vines. Once we’re seated, the conductor walks onstage and bows to us.

“Welcome to this evening’s special performance under the stars,” he announces regally, his eyes twinkling. “The orchestra will open tonight’s program with Beethoven’s Piano Concerto Number Three in C minor. Please enjoy.”

I smile excitedly at Gunner, and he winks back.

When the orchestra begins playing, I’m immediately swept up in the music, each stirring note leaving me breathless. Spellbound.

I’m distantly aware of Gunner watching me, observing my every reaction. When the orchestra launches into Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique Symphony*, I send him a delighted grin.

He grins back and takes my hand in his, lacing our fingers together.

I listen raptly to the song, the sweeping scales and vibrant brass climaxes bringing me to tears. By the end of the achingly poignant symphony, I'm so moved that I give the orchestra a standing ovation, and Gunner joins me.

The conductor bows in response to our applause. His musicians look delighted.

When they take a break, a white-jacketed server brings us wine. We sit drinking from each other's glasses, laughing softly and enjoying ourselves until the orchestra returns.

As the opening chords of Johann Strauss's *Thousand and One Nights* fill the air, Gunner rises and holds out his hand to me. "May I have this dance?"

I give him a radiant smile. "Absolutely."

With a wink, he pulls me to my feet and strolls to the makeshift dance floor in front of the stage. I stare into his eyes as he wraps one hand around my waist, folds his other hand around mine and leads me into a waltz.

We dance without speaking, allowing the beautiful strains of the song to sweep us away. Gunner is an amazing waltzer, leading me effortlessly through every step and turn, his eyes holding mine as he twirls me around. Dancing with him feels otherworldly, like floating on air. I'm half convinced we've traveled back in time to a Regency era ballroom.

As the last notes of the waltz fade away, I slide my mouth to his ear and whisper, "This has been the most unforgettable night of my life."

A tremor runs through his body, as though my words released something inside him. He pulls me closer, keeping our fingers entwined as he whispers in my ear, "One more dance."

When a dreamy violin concerto begins playing, I lay my head on his shoulder and melt into his warmth. We sway gently under the stars, completely losing ourselves in each other and the enchanting music.

When the orchestra finishes the last movement, I lift my head from Gunner's shoulder. I'm breathless, my heart racing as we gaze at each other. So many unspoken words pass between us in those moments.

He takes my face in his hands, lowers his head and slants his mouth over mine. His kiss is so gentle, so infinitely tender and needy that my heart squeezes in my chest.

I breathe his name as he lifts his mouth from mine and stares down at me, his eyes glittering with some unnamed emotion.

"Let's go someplace private."

I blink, still lost in the intimacy of his kiss. "Where?"

"I have an idea." He pulls out his phone and sends a quick text. After exchanging nods with his conductor friend, he takes my hand and steers me across the lawn and down the path leading to the front courtyard.

The Bentley has been brought around, freshly washed and polished after our off-road adventure. Gunner scoops me up with gallant fanfare, carries me to the SUV and deposits me in the passenger seat.

As he slides behind the wheel of our chariot, I ask smilingly, "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he says for the second time that evening.

He opens the sunroof so we can enjoy the night breeze as we drive through the estate. The snakelike road is edged on both sides by enormous banyan trees and palms swaying in the moonlight.

"It's so beautiful out here," I marvel. "You're so lucky to have your very own slice of paradise."

"I am." Gunner looks at me. "Being here with you has given me a whole new appreciation for it."

Smiling at his words, I drop my head back against the seat and gaze up at the endless sea of stars.

A few minutes later, we arrive at a starlit lagoon ringed by forested hills. It looks beautiful, so romantic and serene it could be a Monet painting.

“Oh, Gunner,” I sigh.

He parks close to the shimmering water. “I thought we could go for a midnight boat ride.”

I beam at the bright blue rowboat tied alongside the dock. “You’re on a roll tonight, Romeo.”

He chuckles softly as he cuts the engine. “We could’ve taken the yacht or sailboat out on the water. But I thought this would be cozier.”

“It’s perfect.” Feeling gloriously carefree, I slip off my high heels while Gunner removes his tie and loosens a few shirt buttons.

We swap playful grins before he hops out of the SUV and comes around to open my door. He lifts me out and cradles me against his chest, his grin broadening when I loop my arms around his neck and rain kisses along his jaw.

He carries me down to the dock where he nimbly climbs into the rowboat before helping me aboard. The boat is large enough to hold at least eight people.

I sit on one of the wooden benches while Gunner takes off his tuxedo jacket and drapes it around my bare shoulders. I happily snuggle into the fabric, breathing in his scent as he rolls up his sleeves and then unties the boat from its mooring.

He sits on the bench facing me, grabs the oars and pushes the boat away from the dock. And then we’re off, gliding across the moonlit lagoon.

It’s a perfect summer night, warm with soft breezes coming off the mountains. The water looks like glass under the night sky with giant lily pads floating on the surface.

Sitting there in my beautiful red gown, I feel like a princess in some ethereal fairytale.

“You really know how to make a girl’s fantasies come true, Gunner Ransom,” I say with a sigh.

He grins at me, his eyes glittering in the moonlight. “What else do you fantasize about?”

“A lady never tells.”

He laughs, and my heart swells at the sound of it. I watch him for a few moments, admiring the way he effortlessly rows the boat, the muscles in his forearms rippling with each stroke.

“Where’d you learn to waltz so beautifully?” My tone is half teasing, half serious. “Is that a prerequisite for rich kids? Learning to waltz?”

“Pretty much,” he says with a wry twitch of his lips. “My grandparents are esteemed members of the Dallas Country Club. The worst part of living with them was being forced to attend a ton of boring society balls.”

I grin. “Is that why you hacked country club databases? To exact revenge?”

He chuckles. “Probably.”

I laugh and lean back on the bench, enjoying the soft breeze that wafts over us, freeing tendrils of hair from my updo.

Gunner watches me, his eyes moving over my slitted dress and the bare curve of my thigh before traveling back up to my face and lingering there.

“So what about you, kitten?” he says in that low, rumbly drawl that always heats my blood. “Who taught you to waltz?”

“I took ballroom dance lessons in high school. I can do a mean tango, too.”

“Yeah?” Gunner grins. “That’s sexy as hell.”

“It is,” I agree. “The tango is a very sexy dance.”

His eyes gleam. “You’ll have to show me sometime.”

“With pleasure.” My voice softens as I gaze at him. “I love dancing with you.”

“I feel the same way,” he says just as softly. “There’s nothing better than holding you in my arms, Marlowe.”

We share a tender smile as the boat floats beneath a swath of tropical trees, the leafy fronds brushing the tops of our heads like caressing fingers. I let out a blissful sigh, savoring every moment of this unforgettable fairytale experience.

When we reach the middle of the lagoon, Gunner pulls in the oars and drops the anchor to keep the boat from drifting.

My heart beats faster as he moves to sit beside me, the heat of his body radiating through mine. We stare at each other without speaking until I whisper, “None of this feels real. It feels like a dream.”

A smile lights his eyes. “If this is a dream, it’s the best damn one I’ve ever had, and I don’t want to wake up.”

“Me neither.”

He moves in closer, sinking his hands into my hair. “I’ve been dying to do this all night.”

I stare up at him, barely breathing as he removes the silver hair combs one by one and drops them on the bench. Then he threads his fingers through my loosened tresses as they tumble over my shoulders, framing my face.

He goes completely still, staring at me in riveted fascination. “You are so beautiful, Marlowe. So damn beautiful.”

His words and the look in his eyes make my heart beat triple time. Before I can respond, he dips his head and presses his lips to mine. A riot of sensations sparks through me, tingling across my skin and fluttering in my belly.

Closing my eyes, I wind my arms around his neck, my breasts nestling against his chest. He lets out a soft groan that makes me want to slide right into his lap.

As our kiss takes on a hungry edge, his palm caresses a path up my exposed thigh. Arousal throbs in my breasts and between my legs.

Without breaking the seal of our mouths, he eases me backward, lowering me to the floor between the bench seats.

His tuxedo jacket serves as a blanket beneath me as his body covers mine, his hips gliding between my legs.

I let my head fall back, reveling in the heat and pressure of his kiss. His hand is hot on my skin, sliding up my outer thigh to stroke my hip. I moan and shiver against him, my dress rising higher as I curl my leg around his thigh, pulling him closer.

He lets out a rough groan and bites my bottom lip before sucking my tongue into his mouth. I sweep the inside, tasting him as he tastes me until we're both breathing hard.

"God, baby." He trails openmouthed kisses down my neck to my chest, dipping his tongue between the swell of my cleavage. The hot, wet rasp tightens my nipples and raises a flurry of goose bumps across my skin.

He pushes the top of my dress down and groans, eyes blazing as he looks up from my naked breasts. "No bra?"

"The dress wasn't designed to be worn with a bra," I say breathlessly.

"Thank Christ," he growls. "Zuhair is a fucking genius."

I don't have a chance to respond before he lowers his mouth to my breasts, kissing and nuzzling them almost reverently. I gasp when his lips close over one peaked nipple, pulling on the sensitive flesh as my back bows.

He switches his attention to my other breast, cupping it in his hand and giving it the same teasing torment with his tongue and teeth.

"Gunner ... oh God," I whimper, plunging my fingers in his hair and tugging at the roots.

He kisses his way up my throat to take my mouth in another burning kiss. A breathy moan shudders out of me, my belly clenching on a surge of aching need.

Sliding my arms around his neck, I sink deeper into him, in the slow thrust of his tongue and the sensual roll of his hips. His cock is hard against me, so hard and thick I want to ride him right there in the boat.

Spreading my thighs, I run my hands down his back to squeeze his magnificent ass. He makes a rumbling noise in his throat and rears up over me, his eyes glowing like blue fire as he reaches under my dress to grip the band of my wispy panties. He slides them slowly down my legs, taking his time, and it's the sexiest thing ever.

Almost as sexy as watching him unzip his tuxedo pants and curl his hand around his cock, his inky hair falling over his forehead. It's all I can do not to whimper and rock against him, urging him on.

With a devilish glint in his eye, he torments me a little longer, the weeping head of his cock brushing my inner thighs and teasing my clit. When I'm a quivering mess of anticipation, I wrap my legs around his waist, my heels pressing hard against his ass.

His breath hisses out before his eyes lock with mine, all traces of mischief gone as he notches the head of his cock to my entrance and slides home.

I cry out and latch onto his shoulders, my nails digging into the steel muscles beneath his shirt. He circles his hips against me, sliding almost all the way out and then driving himself back in.

I moan brokenly, almost in tears from the pleasure. He takes my hands and entwines our fingers, pinning them down on either side of my head.

Staring up into his face, I sigh his name and he croons mine, his hips rocking in time with the swaying boat. We feel so good together, connected on a level that goes beyond physical to something I can feel deep in my soul.

Gunner must be feeling the same inexorable pull, the same thrill of connection that binds us. I see it in his glittering eyes, feel it in the way he brushes his lips over mine and utters softly, "You're my angel. My sun and moon. Every beautiful thing I've ever wanted."

My breath catches at his words. "I need you so much," I whisper.

“I need you too, sweetheart,” he whispers back. “More than you’ll ever know.”

As his thrusts intensify, I lock my thighs around his pumping flanks, savoring the slick hardness of his cock stroking deep inside me.

“Gunner,” I moan against his mouth, lost in a haze of sensual euphoria.

He lowers his forehead to mine, staring directly into my eyes as he thrusts once more and holds himself there, embedded as deep as he can. I come apart crying his name, my heart soaring out of my chest.

Seconds later, I feel his cock jerk and then a heated rush of semen fills me as powerful tremors shake his body. As we ride out our climaxes together, his eyes stay fixed on mine, avidly drinking in my pleasure.

When the orgasmic waves recede and our bodies relax into a warm bliss, he releases my hands so he can caress my cheek. Then he brushes his lips over my eyelids, my nose, and finally, my mouth.

I love you.

Gunner stares into my eyes so intently, I wonder if I said the words aloud.

But then he rolls off me onto his back, tucking me against his chest with my leg slung over his thighs. I sigh rapturously, soaking up his delicious heat as I reflect on my newfound revelation.

I love this man. Deeply. Completely. Irrevocably.

I don’t know when it happened or how it will affect the future. Right now it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters but this moment.

We lay there sated, enjoying the warm salty air as we gaze up at the night sky. The stars seem closer than ever and the towering mountain peaks stand out in stark silhouette. It feels like we’re the only two people on the island.

“I wish we didn’t have to go home,” I whisper. “I wish we could stay here forever.”

“Me, too.” Gunner nuzzles my hair with his cheek as the boat bobs beneath us. “We’ll definitely come back. If not here, then one of my other homes.”

“You have more?” Of course he does.

“I own villas in Fiji, Switzerland and Lake Como, Italy. I’ll let you pick where we go next.”

A warm feeling spreads throughout my body. “It really doesn’t matter, as long as we’re together.”

Gunner shifts to prop himself up on one elbow. Gazing down at me, he strokes his knuckles down my cheek, his touch as gentle as his expression. “You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever met.”

My heart flutters in my chest. As he lowers his mouth to mine, I link my hands behind his neck to hold him close to me.

No matter what tomorrow brings, I’ll never forget this magical night or the amazing man who made my dreams a reality.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



MARLOWE

THE MORNING AFTER WE RETURN FROM Hawaii, I lay in bed drifting in and out of sleep. My limbs feel deliciously heavy, my mind flooded with memories of Gunner and me making love in our tropical hideaway.

I don't want to get up. I want to stay right where I am, warm and cozy and wonderfully content. But something tugs at my consciousness, dragging me awake. When I open my eyes, I find Gunner sitting at my side watching me sleep.

He's wearing dark suit pants and his hair is damp, water droplets rolling down his bare chest. The tenderness in his gaze fills me with a sweet ache.

"Morning, sweetheart," he murmurs.

"Good morning." I give him a dreamy smile, lying on my stomach with my head resting on my folded arms. "You're up early. The sun's barely out."

"I know. Gotta head into the office and get up to speed on everything." He buries his hand in my hair and leans down to seal his mouth over mine.

Waves of pleasure spiral through me, heating my blood. I breathe him in, my senses flooded with the intoxicating scent of his skin, his freshly shampooed hair and minty cool mouth.

He pulls slowly away, tracing my bottom lip with his thumb as I lift my heavy lids to meet his gaze.

“Hello again,” he whispers.

“Hello, yourself,” I whisper back.

He smiles softly, spreading my hair over the pillow. “Mrs. Calder and Mr. Leland won’t be back until tomorrow. So we’ll have the house to ourselves tonight.”

“Oh my,” I say with a naughty smile. “Whatever shall we do with ourselves?”

“Oh, I can think of a thing or two,” he murmurs, pressing his lips between my shoulder blades.

I shiver, my toes curling into the mattress. “Do you want breakfast? I can make you some French toast.”

“Mmm. I love your French toast, but I’ll have to take a rain check and grab something at work.” He starts kissing his way down my spine, licking and nibbling.

I release a breathy moan into my pillow. “Gunner ...”

His low groan rumbles across my skin. “God, what I wouldn’t give to spend the day in bed with you.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Can’t. Got a big meeting with a top biotech firm. Multimillion-dollar contract at stake.”

I grin. “Multimillion, huh? Haven’t you made enough money?”

“No such thing.” He licks the dimple at the base of my spine, making me arch in pleasure. Then he strokes the back of my thigh and squeezes my ass cheek, coaxing another moan from my throat before he reluctantly pulls away.

I lick my lips, staring at the outline of his cock bulging against his pants. “Mmm,” I purr wickedly. “Sure you don’t want to stay a bit longer?”

His answering scowl is absurdly sexy. “Don’t tempt me.”

I laugh as he picks up a clean undershirt and tugs it over his head, the soft cotton accentuating every muscle in his chest. He disappears into the closet and reemerges in a crisp

white shirt tucked into his pants. A beautiful silk tie hangs loose around his neck, and he's wearing one of his many pairs of Italian loafers.

Rolling onto my side, I watch him push a platinum cufflink through the buttonhole at his wrist. Watching him dress is a pleasure I'll never, ever get enough of.

As he expertly knots his tie, I stretch languidly under the luxurious sheets. Though I'm seven years younger than Gunner, I have only a fraction of his stamina. He's always on the move, bursting with energy, vitality and virility. He can get three hours of sleep, work out like a machine, come back to bed and fuck me senseless, then shower and head out the door to conquer the world. I swear he's superhuman. A beast in Brioni.

I let out a lazy sigh. "I need to get up, too."

"No, you don't," Gunner says. "Take the day off. Get some rest and catch up on your reading assignments before class."

"I'm ahead, actually."

He flashes me a sideways grin. "Overachiever."

I laugh. "Takes one to know one."

"Touché." He chuckles, straightening his tie. "Perspectives on Information. That's the class you have today, right?"

"Yup." I love that he memorized my schedule. "From three to six."

His phone buzzes on the nightstand. As he walks over to pick it up, I yawn and indulge in another catlike stretch.

"Seriously though. I do need to get up soon. I have a meeting with my advisor before class."

Gunner types out a text, thumbs flying over the keypad. "Who's your advisor?"

"Dr. Ying Lee. Know her?"

"I do. She's great. Fiercely intelligent and accomplished. You're in good hands." Gunner slides his phone into his pocket and leans down to give me a quick kiss, taking an extra

moment to sweep his tongue over my lips. When I shiver, he rubs his nose against mine, a sweetly tender gesture that turns my insides to jelly.

“I’d better run before I end up back in bed with you.” He kisses the tip of my nose and smiles. “Have a good day at school.”

“Thank you.” I grin. “Hope your big meeting goes well.”

“They always do,” he says with that sexy alpha confidence that makes me swoon.

He grabs his suit jacket and winks at me before striding from the room.

Long after he’s gone, I lay there with a silly smile on my face, reliving every moment of our magical weekend together. He showed me the time of my life and made me feel cherished beyond words.

I want to do something special for him. Something romantic and memorable. But what do you give a gazillionaire who can buy the world with the snap of his finger? I don’t have the money to lavish him with expensive gifts and exotic vacations. I don’t have connections to arrange private musical performances for him.

Thankfully, I don’t need a fortune or the right contacts to show my appreciation to Gunner. The best gift I can give him should come from my heart, and I know just what—

My thoughts are interrupted when the man himself comes striding through the door, yanking off his tie.

“You’re back.” I sit up in surprise. “What’re you doing here?”

He sends me a darkly predatory look. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you lying in my bed, all naked and warm and luscious.”

I laugh. “Are you serious?”

“As a fucking heart attack.” He steps out of his shoes and rips his shirt open, scattering buttons everywhere. “I got as far as the first traffic light before I had to turn around.”

My belly quivers at the pure lust on his face. “What about your meeting?”

“I’ve got a couple hours.” Eyes locked on mine, he unbuckles his belt and opens his pants, freeing his hard cock. Then he practically dives on top of me, crushing his mouth to mine and turning my breathless laughter into a moan.

AFTER GUNNER LEAVES FOR THE SECOND time, I get up to take a shower and wash my hair. Since we got home late last night, I’m a little jet-lagged and could use a few more hours of rest. But I have things to do, so sleep will have to wait.

Letting my hair air-dry, I get dressed and head down to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. As I sit at the center island, my phone’s ringtone goes off. It’s my sister.

I push the speaker button and answer, “Hey, you.”

“Holy shit!” Her loud squeal fills the room. “TMZ has pictures of you and Gunner!”

I almost drop my coffee mug. “What?”

“I just saw pictures of you and your boss slash lover romping on the beach in Hawaii!”

I gasp, staring at my phone in disbelief. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“You think I’d joke about something like this?”

She wouldn’t. Not in a million years.

“But ... we were on his private beach,” I say weakly. “How did TMZ get photos?”

“Hello? Ever heard of helicopters? Drones?” Ember laughs at my naïveté. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you were going to Hawaii!”

“I didn’t know. It was a surprise and I only had, like, two hours to get ready before he whisked me off in his plane.”

“Oh, my God, Marlowe,” Ember breathes. “That’s so freaking romantic!”

“It was. Every minute of it.” I’m smiling now, the exquisite memories warming my body all over again.

“The article says he flew in the Austin Symphony to perform for you. Is that true?”

My smile softens. “He did. It was a wonderful surprise.”

“No kidding,” Ember says with a dreamy sigh. “The thump you just heard was me swooning to the floor.”

I laugh, tucking my hair behind my ear.

“He is so fucking gorgeous, Mar. I don’t mean to lust after your man, but the way he looked in those swim trunks had me drooling all over my damn phone. Holy hell, those shredded abs and those beefy thighs. How do you keep your clothes on around him?”

I grin. “Who says I do?”

Ember laughs wickedly. “You naughty girl. Wait till Mom finds out about you and Gunner. She’s gonna lose her mind. She’ll probably call Aunt Nora and everyone she knows to brag about her daughter bagging a billionaire.”

I frown. “I hope not.”

Right on cue, my phone buzzes with another call. One glance at the screen confirms that the news has reached our mother. *Great. Just great.*

“Now that you’re dating a famous heartthrob, the paparazzi will be stalking you everywhere.” There’s a sympathetic grin in Ember’s voice. “Congratulations. You’ve officially arrived.”

“Arrived where?” I grumble. “In hell?”

Ember laughs. “How can you talk about hell when you just spent the weekend in paradise? You looked like you were on cloud nine in those pictures. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so happy and carefree.” Her voice quiets. “You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

My throat grows tight. “Of course I am,” I try to joke. “I’d be in love with *anyone* who whisked me off to Hawaii.”

Ember doesn't laugh. She can see right through me.

I take a sip of coffee to wet my bone-dry throat. Our mother follows up with a text, but I ignore it.

"He must be getting pretty serious about you," Ember says softly.

My heartbeat doubles. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, I mean, he took you to *Hawaii*—"

"That doesn't prove anything. How many times have we seen celebrity couples making out on a yacht one day and breaking up dramatically the very next week?"

"True," Ember concedes. "Celebrity couples are notoriously fickle. But Gunner seems different. When I googled him, I didn't see any pictures of him frolicking on his yacht with bikini-clad supermodels. His brother, yes. But not him."

"That's because he's a crazy workaholic who rarely takes vacations."

"My point exactly! He wasn't known for cavorting on tropical islands until *you* came into his life. Can't you see what a big deal that is?"

I swallow hard and close my eyes, willing my stomach to stop flipping out.

"I know what you're thinking," Ember says in a gentler tone. "You don't want to get your hopes up about Gunner because you're afraid he'll break your heart. Ever since Dad died, you've been going through life waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"That's not true," I say, but the denial rings hollow. The reality is that I've been keeping men at a distance for so long, it's become second nature. Gunner is the first man I've let anywhere close to my heart since losing my dad. It feels both terrifying and absolutely right.

"Guarding your heart is understandable. Smart even." Ember snorts. "God knows there are a lot of losers out there, as my dating history proves."

“My track record isn’t much better,” I point out wryly. “You just got a three-year head start.”

She chuckles.

I cradle my coffee mug between my palms. “You’re right about my feelings for Gunner. He’s the most amazing guy I’ve ever met. Despite our rocky start, I’m glad our paths crossed that night at the bar.”

“Wow.” Ember sounds awed. “You’ve fallen hard, haven’t you?”

“Head over heels,” I admit in defeat. “I want to be with him. I just ... I don’t know if he’s the forever type.”

“Well, there’s only one way to—Shit, gotta run,” Ember blurts abruptly.

“What’s wrong?”

“My boss is coming and I’m supposed to be working on a brief. I’ll call you later to continue this convo and get the deets on your romantic getaway.” She makes kissing noises and hangs up.

Sipping my coffee, I thumb the phone screen to read my mother’s text message: **Darling! So thrilled about you and Gunner Ransom! You look fabulous together. You even look good in your bikini—keep cutting out those carbs to get your stomach even flatter! Now that you’re officially dating Gunner, I’m eager to meet him. Let’s check our calendars and pick a date!**

I drop my head on the counter and groan. Caroline Somerset will be the death of me, I swear to God.

When the doorbell suddenly rings, I’m half afraid to find her waiting on the doorstep with her full set of Louis Vuitton luggage.

Twisting my damp hair into a topknot, I head out of the kitchen to answer the door.

I freeze when I find myself face to face with Gunner’s ex-fiancée. I would have preferred my mother, and that’s saying a lot.

The icy blonde lowers her sunglasses to look me up and down, her red lips curling into a sneer. “Nice tan.”

I swallow uncomfortably. “Mr. Ransom isn’t—”

“*Mr. Ransom?*” she jeers mockingly. “Is that what you call him when you’re on your knees sucking his cock?”

My face flames. I’m at a complete loss for words.

Laurene smirks. “At least you didn’t insult my intelligence by denying that you’re fucking my fiancé.”

I frown. “He’s not y—”

“Anyway, I didn’t come here for him.” She shoves past me into the house, her heels tapping sharply on the marble floor as she struts down the hall like the queen of the castle.

I have no choice but to follow her.

Her blond hair is flawlessly cut and highlighted, glistening like strands of golden silk. She’s wearing a designer sheath dress that probably cost more than my undergraduate tuition—all five years. A towering pair of Manolos accentuates her perfectly toned calves, and a diamond-studded fuchsia Birkin hangs from her elbow.

She strides into the sitting room and walks slowly around, reminding me of a shark circling her prey before she strikes. “So how was Kauai?”

“It was amazing,” I say quietly. “But I’m sure you’d rather not hear the details.”

“Oh, please,” she says with a dismissive snort. “You think I care that he whisked you away to Hawaii for the weekend?”

“You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t care.”

“I *don’t* care,” she snaps.

I stare at her perfect face, seeing the hurt beneath her hostility. “He never took you, did he?” I say with dawning comprehension. “You were engaged for six months and he never took you to his home in Hawaii.”

She skewers me with such a scathing glare it's a miracle I don't disintegrate into a pillar of salt. "I don't need him to take me anywhere," she hisses furiously. "I've traveled all over the world, stayed in royal palaces, partied with movie stars. Unlike you, I'm filthy rich and can afford my own goddamn vacations."

I say nothing, which seems to further antagonize her.

"Did he tell you that his family adores me?" She makes a show of running her finger along the marble fireplace mantel, checking for dust. "Every time we visit them in Dallas, his grandparents fawn over me, and his mother and I go on shopping trips and get massages together. We have so much in common, so we always have lots to talk about. It's wonderful."

I swallow, feeling a sick knot in my stomach.

"Gunner's family thinks I'm perfect for him. And they're right," Laurene says with a viciously smug smile. "*I'm* the kind of woman he belongs with. Not some unsophisticated rube from Steel City USA."

Her words strike a raw nerve, but I refuse to let her see it. "If you were so perfect for Gunner, you'd still be with him. But you're not." Pause. "I am."

She lets out a harsh, cutting burst of laughter. "Silly little girl. Do you actually think he's going to commit to you? Put a ring on your finger? You're nothing more than a diversion to him. A convenient piece of ass. He'll never take you seriously. The only reason he's not with me is because *I* broke up with him, not the other way around." She gives me a contemptuous once-over and smiles with chilling satisfaction. "Gunner loves me. He asked me to marry him because he wants to spend the rest of his life with me. No matter how many blowjobs you give him, you will never, ever replace me in his heart."

I flinch at her words. A hard slap across my cheek would have hurt less.

"Thanks for stopping by," I force the words out. "As much as I'm enjoying our little chat, I have far better things to do."

“Like what?” she taunts derisively. “Do you need to go wash Gunner’s underwear? Scrub his toilet? Drop off his dry cleaning? Does playing house with the lord of the manor make you feel like his wifey?”

I lift my chin and look at her head-on. “I’m sorry you were so triggered by the tabloid pictures that you felt the need to drive over here to—what? Insult me? Intimidate me? Threaten me? What exactly did you hope to achieve?”

She walks right up to me, a malicious gleam in her eyes. “Let me clue you in on something. Gunner is a Type A personality. He works himself to the bone and uses sex as a stress reliever. Right now you’re serving that purpose. But your young body and tight little pussy won’t satisfy him forever. He has a ravenous appetite that craves variety. When he gets bored with you—and he will—he’s going to send you packing.”

I dredge up a cool smile. “In that case, I’d better enjoy him while I can. Maybe if I’m really lucky, he might actually fall in love with me. Crazier things have happened, right?”

Laurene’s eyes narrow, and for just a moment her confidence wavers, doubt flickering across her features.

I wait tensely, arms folded.

She leans into my face. “Don’t get too smug, Marlowe the merry maid. Your expiration date is coming sooner than you think.” She tucks her handbag into the crook of her elbow, slides on her sunglasses and smirks at me. “Tick tock, bitch.”

Before I can respond, she struts past me and out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



MARLOWE

THE UGLY CONFRONTATION WITH LAURENE HAUNTS me for the rest of the day.

No matter how hard I try to put it out of my mind, I can't stop replaying the hateful things she said. I know she was acting out of spite and jealousy, but there was enough truth behind her words to ramp up my insecurities.

Gunner *did* ask her to marry him. So he must have loved her at some point. Maybe he still does. Maybe he's just using me as a rebound. Maybe he'll toss me aside when he's ready to go back to her, or when he finds someone new. She certainly wasn't wrong about his insatiable sex drive. Given his kinky predilections, keeping him satisfied might be impossible.

These unsettling prospects depress me as I head to campus that afternoon. I muddle through my meeting with my advisor, coming off more scatterbrained than my academic record reflects. When I get to class, I remain so wrapped up in my thoughts that I barely register the whispers and stares following me to my seat.

Shortly after class starts, the professor announces that we have a surprise guest lecturer. It's Harlan Pierce, the founder and CEO of Digitistic, a company renowned for developing a digital workstation for musicians to connect and create music.

He's kind of a big deal around Austin. Early thirties, attractive, with expensively cut blond hair, gray eyes and a

sculpted beard. He wears a dark blazer over an indie band T-shirt, ripped jeans and vintage sneakers. Something about his appearance seems a bit try-hard, like he's merely playing the role of hipster CEO. It's rumored that he's not the brains behind the company, he's the money behind the brains.

During his presentation, he discusses the economic and technological upheavals that transformed the music industry. He touts his company's innovative business model and name-drops several Grammy-winning artists he's worked with. He's an engaging speaker, and despite my bad mood, he manages to hold my attention. I even get a little excited when he announces that Digitistic is recruiting interns with music backgrounds.

Once his lecture ends, I grab my backpack and join the crowd of students lining up to talk to him.

While I'm waiting my turn, a voice behind me says excitedly, "Aren't you Gunner Ransom's girlfriend?"

I look over my shoulder to see a tall, pretty Latina grinning at me.

"I saw pictures of you and Gunner on TMZ. Oh, my God, you are so damn lucky!" She thrusts her hand out. "Valeria."

I shake her hand. "Marlowe."

"Yup. That's what the article called you, along with *fresh-faced ingénue* and the *billionaire's babe*." Her grin is so infectious I find myself smiling back despite the mortified heat burning my cheeks. "So what's Gunner like? Is he as romantic as the article made him sound? Did he really arrange a private concert for you?"

Ummm ...

She laughs at my expression. "Don't mind me. I'm just being nosy. Do you want to be study partners?"

I smile. "Sure."

We exchange phone numbers and make plans to meet for lunch on Friday.

When it's my turn to speak to Harlan Pierce, he stares at me with recognition. "Don't I know you?"

Not again. "Um, I don't think—"

He snaps his fingers as if he's trying to remember my name. "That's right. You're the piano girl."

"Piano girl?" I repeat blankly.

He grins. "One of my acquaintances attended a dinner party where you played the piano. He recorded your performance and shared the video with me. You're pretty talented."

"Thank you." I smile and offer my hand. "Marlowe Somerset."

"Great to meet you, Marlowe," he says, shaking my hand. "What're you studying?"

"Information Studies. I'd like to be a music librarian."

"Excellent." His smile is warm and friendly. "I'd love to hear more. And maybe you can share your feedback on a new streaming app we've got in development. Wanna grab a coffee?"

I hear Gunner's voice in my head. *No more dates with other men.*

Harlan chuckles. "Sorry. Didn't mean to put you on the spot. Guess I should have asked first if you have a boyfriend."

"No, it's okay," I assure him. "I'd love to get coffee and discuss your new app." *Surely Gunner can't object to me networking with potential employers who happen to be men?*

Harlan's gray eyes twinkle. "I don't want to get you in trouble. Why don't you walk me out so we can talk some more? If I seem harmless enough, we can see about that coffee."

I smile. "Sounds good."

Twenty minutes later as we're leaving the classroom together, Harlan says, "You're not from Texas, are you?"

“No. Pittsburgh.”

“Huh. I would have guessed the Midwest.” He gives me a thoughtful look. “Some might argue that Pittsburgh has more Midwest vibes than East Coast.”

“Some might,” I concede. “Why did you think I was from the Midwest?”

“You have a natural, wholesome charm that I typically associate with Midwesterners.”

I smile. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.” He winks, and I wonder if he’s flirting with me.

When we emerge from the building, I’m surprised to find Gunner standing near the curb talking to two professors. He’s smiling and nodding, one hand tucked in his pocket in that effortlessly masculine way of his.

When he sees me walking with Harlan, his expression visibly darkens.

Shit. I hope he’s not going to do the jealous boyfriend routine.

He ends his conversation, shaking hands and exchanging shoulder slaps with the professors. As they walk away, his eyes fasten onto mine.

My heart starts to thrum.

Before he can take a step forward, two gushing girls approach and ask for his autograph. He graciously signs their shirts and takes a selfie with them. As they walk away giggling excitedly, he heads over to me and Harlan. He doesn’t look happy.

I swallow hard, my mouth running dry. “Gunner, this is—”

“We’ve met.”

I feel a chill at the sheer animosity in his voice.

“Indeed,” Harlan drawls, smirking faintly. “Gunner and I go way back.”

“Really?” I say, surprised.

The two men ignore me, staring each other down.

I nervously clear my throat to break their tense standoff. “Mr. Pierce was our guest lecturer—”

“Call me Harlan,” he says with an indulgent smile. “I’m barely a year older than Gunner.”

Before I can respond, Gunner slides an arm around my waist, pulling me to his side. The gesture is unmistakably possessive. Dangerous.

It doesn’t go unnoticed by Harlan, who smiles narrowly at Gunner. “I saw a video of Marlowe playing the piano at your dinner party. She’s quite talented.”

“Yes, she is,” Gunner agrees.

“Far too talented to be toiling away as your”—Harlan pauses condescendingly—“housekeeper.”

Heat rushes into my face. *What the actual hell?*

“Believe me,” Gunner says evenly, “I know how lucky I am to have found such a rare gem.”

“A rare gem indeed.” Harlan gives me a conspiratorial smile. “Don’t let him take you for granted.”

I force an awkward laugh.

Gunner’s hand flexes against my waist, then slides up my back to draw me even closer to his side. When I look at him, he says curtly, “You’re riding home with me.”

“What about the Range—”

“I’ll send someone to pick it up.”

Harlan observes us with mild amusement. “I guess I’ll have to take a rain check on coffee.” He pulls a business card from his blazer pocket and hands it to me. “Give me a call sometime to discuss an internship opportunity.”

“Um, okay.” I manage a smile. “Thank you.”

Gunner looks downright homicidal. “Let’s go,” he growls, grasping my upper arm. I bristle at the proprietary contact, but

I don't resist.

As he leads me toward the waiting car at the curb, Harlan calls out to him, "Say hello to your mother for me."

Gunner stops cold in his tracks.

As I watch in shock, he charges back over to Harlan and grabs him by his shirtfront, pulling the man toward him so he's right up in his face. Fear widens Harlan's eyes and his throat bobs in a hard swallow.

Gunner tightens his grip, their noses almost touching as he peers menacingly into Harlan's eyes. He's much bigger and taller, seething with barely leashed violence. I can't help shivering, astonished at seeing this side of him.

"Gunner," I call out in a shaky voice. "Let's go home."

"Good idea." Despite his obvious unease, Harlan manages a smirk. "We can't have the university's most celebrated alumnus causing a scene, now can we?"

Gunner's eyes narrow with lethal warning. After another hair-raising moment, he releases Harlan, shoving him so hard that he stumbles back several steps and nearly falls.

Gunner rakes him with a contemptuous look before turning and stalking back over to me. With his hand gripping my elbow, he steers me firmly to the car where Trace stands with an impassive expression, as if watching his boss rough up other men is an everyday occurrence.

When he opens the back door for us, Gunner practically shoves me into the backseat and then crowds in behind me.

I whirl on him, my head spinning. "What the hell just hap—"

He snatches Harlan's business card out of my hand, rips it into pieces and throws them out the window as the car pulls off.

I stare at him in disbelief. "What on earth is going on between you and Harlan?"

Fury pulses his jaw. "Stay the fuck away from him."

“Why?”

“I don’t want him anywhere near you.” He grits the words out. “Don’t cross me on this.”

The low warning sends a chill through me. I shake my head, feeling breathless and disoriented. “I don’t understand, Gunner. Why do you have such a problem with him?”

“He’s a soulless fucking bastard. That’s all you need to know.”

“What did he do? And why did his comment about your mother set you off?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“*Seriously?* I just got caught in the middle of your epic pissing contest! If he offers me an internship, don’t you think I deserve to know why there’s bad blood between you before I turn him down?”

Gunner clenches his jaw and says nothing. The violence seething inside him vibrates the air between us.

“Fine. Keep it to yourself,” I huff, crossing my arms. “Just don’t use me as a pawn in your damn feud.”

His expression hardens into a glare. “The only one who wants to use you is Harlan.”

“Why would he use me?” I challenge hotly.

“Don’t be naïve,” Gunner growls. “You work for me, and he obviously knows we’re involved. He’ll gladly use you to get to me.”

“Why does everything have to be about you?” I counter angrily. “Did it ever occur to you that he genuinely finds me talented and thinks I have potential?”

“I’m sure he does. But if he can use you to hurt me, all the better. I’m not giving him the fucking chance.”

“So tell me what happened between you,” I half plead.

He just gives me a stony look.

I shake my head in frustration. “I’m sure you have a good reason for hating Harlan, and whatever it is, you know I’ll be on your side. But please understand that I have career goals, Gunner. As much as I enjoy working for you, I can’t be your housekeeper forever.”

He scowls. “You don’t need Harlan. I can get you any damn job you want.”

“I don’t want you pulling strings for me! If I can’t get a job on my own merits, it’s not for me.”

A muscle in his cheek twitches. “You don’t want to work for Harlan. Trust me.” He turns away to glare out the window, putting an end to our conversation.

We sit in seething silence for the rest of the way home. As we pull up to the house, his ringtone goes off. When he slides the phone out of his pocket to check the screen, I catch a glimpse of the caller’s name.

Laurene.

My blood boils. As soon as the car stops, I grab my backpack and lunge out the door.

Gunner is right on my heels, grabbing my arm before I reach the front steps. “Marlowe—”

I whirl around, furious. “You’re such a damn hypocrite!”

He frowns. “How am I a hypocrite?”

“You go ballistic if I simply *talk* to other men! Yet I’m supposed to be okay with your bitchy ex paying house calls!”

His eyebrows slam together. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Laurene showed up at the house this morning after you left.”

“*What?*”

“She didn’t tell you? Oh, we had a nice little chat,” I jeer with bitter sarcasm. “She told me all about how your family adores her, how she and your mom are besties who go shopping together and have spa days. She also gleefully

informed me that I'm nothing more than a convenient piece of ass you'll be getting rid of any day now."

Gunner shoves a hand through his hair. "Goddammit."

Tears sting my eyes. "It was very enlightening, especially the part about your ravenous appetite that craves variety. What was *that* about, Gunner? Did you cheat on her?"

"No. Fuck." He exhales a harsh breath. "I didn't know she came to see you. I'll talk to her."

"Maybe you shouldn't," I toss back. "Maybe she did me a favor by warning me."

His eyes narrow to razor-thin slits. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What am I to you, Gunner?" I demand. "Am I just your plaything? A pretty little toy to amuse yourself with until something younger and hotter comes along?"

He scowls fiercely. "You're talking crazy."

"Am I?"

"Yes," he grinds out. "You are."

"So what're we doing here?" I gesture between the two of us. "You don't want to define our relationship, yet you demand exclusivity. You can't have it both ways."

"I'm not trying to have it both ways."

"You totally are," I hiss, jabbing my finger in his chest.

With a low growl, he grabs my hand and yanks me toward him.

I suck in a shaky breath. "Look—"

He bends his head and takes my mouth. Hard. Angry. Possessive.

A broken moan escapes me as his tongue separates my lips and sweeps boldly inside. My fingers curl into his shirtfront as he strokes every corner of my mouth, velvet lashes of scorching pleasure that threaten to consume me.

I'm trembling against him, my senses reeling from the demanding ownership in his kiss. When he grabs a handful of my ass and lifts me into his body, I finally summon the strength to wrench away from him, gasping.

He stares down at me, his eyes a little wild. "Marlowe—"

"Please don't," I say, voice cracking.

"Don't what?"

"Don't manipulate me with sex. Not when I'm trying to have an honest conversation with you."

"Dammit, Marlowe, what do you want from me?" he growls, holding my head between his hands. "We're two adults enjoying a mutually satisfying relationship. We don't need cutesy labels to broadcast our relationship status on social media. If that's what you're looking for, I suggest you grow the fuck up."

His words slice through my heart like a knife. I shove away from him, tears scalding my eyes.

Frustration tightens his jaw. "Baby—"

I hold up a shaking hand. "I had an amazing time this weekend, and I truly thank you for that. But it's probably best that we keep things platonic from now on."

"*Are you fucking serious?*" he snarls, gorgeously furious. "There's nothing platonic about us, never has been. From the moment we met, we wanted to fuck each other with a desperation I've never felt before. We couldn't be platonic if our lives depended on it."

My heart pounds in my throat, but I manage to keep my voice steady. "Sleeping with you wasn't something I took lightly. It meant everything to me. But it's not enough, Gunner. I'm all in, and I need to know you feel the same. But if all you want is a casual fling, let me know now so we can stop wasting each other's time."

He shakes his head at me, his jaw clenched tight. The last woman who gave him an ultimatum ended up alone and heartbroken. I'm probably headed for the same fate.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he says in a stony voice.

“Better now than later.” Turning away before he sees the tears in my eyes, I hurry up the steps and let myself into the house.

When he doesn’t follow, I continue upstairs to my room and lock myself inside. Only then do I start crying.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



GUNNER

AUSTIN COUNTRY CLUB IS THE CITY'S most exclusive private club, located on the banks of Lake Austin with a view of the iconic Pennybacker Bridge.

After launching my company, I joined the club to network and cultivate relationships with other business executives. I earned their respect by purposely not discussing business on the golf course. Deals were made afterward—over drinks at the nineteenth hole or during private hunting trips.

The country club is also where I met Laurene. I first saw her on the tennis court, a leggy blonde in a pink tennis outfit hitting perfect volleys. She saw me at the same time and got so distracted that she completely missed her next shot. Flustered and embarrassed, she'd skewered me with a dirty look that made me chuckle before continuing on my way.

Two hours later, I was leaving the locker room after a workout when Laurene confronted me. She claimed that I owed her dinner for costing her the tennis match. She was beautiful, haughty and clearly too high maintenance for my taste. But I indulged her, and seven months later we were engaged.

Ten minutes after my fight with Marlowe, I march into the club's main dining room, my blood pulsing with fury.

"Good evening, Mr. Ransom," the maître d' greets me with an obsequious smile. "Will you be dining at your usual—"

“No. I’m looking for Miss Vandenberg.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Right this way, sir.”

I’m ushered to a private room just off the terrace dining floor. And there she is, holding court at a table with her circle of snobby friends.

I storm through the door, drawing shocked stares and scandalized gasps.

Laurene leaps to her feet. “Gunner—”

I sweep a hard glance over the table. “Get out.”

The women take one look at my face and scurry off in a blur of designer labels and spray tans.

Laurene stands there fuming with her arms crossed. “Really, Gunner, there’s no need to be rude to my—”

“You talked to Marlowe.”

She defiantly tosses her hair back. “So what if I did?”

Rage propels me forward. “You had no fucking right.”

“I had *every* right!” she fires back. “It’s bad enough that you’re screwing your maid, but then you had to go and flaunt her in front of the world, and now everyone’s laughing at me!”

“Stay away from her.”

Her mouth falls open in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Dead fucking serious,” I snarl, rounding the table to reach her. “Stay away from Marlowe. I’m warning you.”

“*That’s* what you came here to say?” she shrieks, outraged. “My God, Gunner, are you trying to make a fool of me? How could you take your maid to Hawaii instead of the woman you were actually engaged to?”

I shake my head at her. “We broke up, Laurene. People move on after breakups—”

“I HAVEN’T!” she screams, pointing at her chest. “I haven’t moved on, Gunner! How could *you*?”

“We weren’t right for each other,” I say, keeping my voice calm if only to counter her near-hysteria. “You did us both a favor by ending our relationship.”

“I don’t believe this.” She gives me a wounded look. “How can you even say these things to me?”

“Because it’s the truth.” I look her directly in the eye. “Before you broke up with me, I thought our relationship was working. I thought we were both getting what we needed from each other. But I was wrong, and I’m man enough to admit it. Maybe I should have spent more time with you. Maybe I should have taken you on nonbusiness trips. But to be perfectly honest, Laurene, I didn’t think it was that important to you. We both traveled extensively when we were growing up. By the time we were ten, we’d visited nearly every country on the planet. We took those experiences for granted, lost sight of just how privileged and fortunate we were. But it’s different with Marlowe.”

“Why?” Laurene jeers. “Because she’s a poor hick who’s never been anywhere?”

I frown at the insult, but I’m remembering Marlowe’s girlish peals of laughter, her ecstatic twirling on the clifftop, the radiant wonder on her face as she took in everything. It may sound corny as hell, but experiencing Kauai with her made me feel reborn. It was as if I were visiting the island for the first time, seeing the sights through her eyes. She made me forget about work obligations, deadlines, market forecasts, balance sheets. She made me forget everything but the simple pleasure of being with her.

I’m not ready to give her up yet. I don’t know if I ever will be.

“Come on, baby,” Laurene says with a sulky pout. “I’m tired of fighting. We’ve had our time apart and you’ve had your little fun. Now let’s just—”

“No.” My voice cuts through her words. “We’re not getting back together. It’s over.”

Her head snaps back as if I hit her, and for a moment her eyes seem to water. “We’re over? Just like that?”

“Yes.”

She motions around the room. “I can’t believe you’d be cruel enough to end our relationship at the same place where we met!”

“I’m not trying to be cruel, but you need to accept my decision,” I tell her. “Harassing Marlowe won’t change my mind. It’ll only piss me off, and believe me, you don’t want that.”

An ugly, vindictive smile twists her lips. “You’re making a big mistake. You and Marlowe have nothing in common. Your friends will never accept her, and neither will your mother. We both think Marlowe is a gold-digging whore, and I’m going to make sure—”

I grab the back of her head and bring my mouth to her ear. “For the last fucking time, I don’t want you talking to Marlowe. Don’t even go near her. If you ever find yourself in the same vicinity as her, stop what you’re doing and leave the premises. Do I make myself clear?”

I feel her swallow. Hard.

“Contact her again and we’re going to have a serious fucking problem. Nod to let me know you understand.”

She bobs her head up and down.

I pull back to level a glare at her. “I’ve always been a gentleman with you. Don’t make me regret it.”

Her face tightens and reddens.

I release her, pivot on my heel and head for the door.

“It wasn’t supposed to end this way!” she cries out petulantly. “When I broke up with you, it was only supposed to be temporary. You were supposed to come to your senses and come crawling back to me. You weren’t supposed to meet someone else!”

I turn slowly and shake my head at her. “Come now, sweetheart. When have you ever known me to crawl any damn where?”

Her face crumples and a tear slips from her eye.

“Goodbye, Laurene. I truly wish you all the best.” I turn and start walking away.

“Do you love her?”

Her words stop me cold.

“You never told me you loved me. Even when you proposed, the word ‘love’ never left your mouth. I told myself you loved me in your own way, but now I’m not so sure.” Her tone is bitterly accusing. “So again I ask, Gunner. Do you love her?”

My chest constricts like a vise around my lungs.

With a calm I don’t feel, I button my suit jacket and smooth back my hair, then walk out the door without responding.

THE QUESTION IS STILL BURNING THROUGH my brain the next morning as I sit behind my desk, fingers steeped in front of my face, half listening while my assistant rattles off a list of action items requiring my attention.

“... need to work on your keynote speech for the tech conference in Munich. I’ll email your travel itinerary once it’s finalized. I made a few tweaks to your welcome message for the incoming security trainees. The film crew will be here at eleven to record your video. The suit you’re wearing is perfect, but I think you should go with a different tie. Something softer, less austere. I picked out three options for your consideration. After the taping, you have a lunch meeting with ...”

As Veronica’s voice drones on, I tune her out. On the corner of my desk is one of the pictures I took of Marlowe this weekend. She’s standing on the cliff with her face lifted to the

sun, her long dark hair blowing in the wind. She'd looked so damn beautiful my heart ached.

I couldn't wait to frame the picture and display it on my desk.

Now it mocks me like a cruel joke.

"... *Businessweek* called to confirm your photo shoot next week. They want you to wear a Yu-Gi-Oh costume for the cover."

"Fine, whatever." A beat passes before Veronica's words sink in. "Wait, what?"

She laughs. "I knew you weren't paying attention."

I give her a disgruntled look. "Yu-Gi-Oh? Really?"

"Sorry, boss. Couldn't resist." She smiles for a moment before the humor fades from her eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"Just peachy." I gesture impatiently. "What else you got for me?"

She frowns. "What's the point of me talking if you're not going to listen?"

I narrow my eyes at her.

She narrows hers right back. Her ability to cut through my bullshit is just one of the many qualities that makes her an indispensable assistant.

"Fine," I relent gruffly. "Let's pick this up later—"

"—when you're more focused. I agree." Veronica stands with her tablet and strides to the door, where she turns and fixes me with a meaningful look. "Should I send her flowers?"

I feign ignorance. "Who?"

She snorts and shakes her head before walking out the door.

Annoyed with myself, I swivel my chair around to face the window and the morning sunlight bathing the city below. I'm not thinking about the view or the myriad tasks demanding my attention.

I'm thinking about Marlowe. I haven't seen her since yesterday, and it's driving me out of my mind.

When I got home last night, I went straight to her room to talk to her, to assure her that my ex was out of the picture. But she was nowhere to be found. With worry and frustration tightening my nerves, I called her to find out where she'd gone. She declined the call and texted to say she was spending the night at Quinn's. Striving for patience, I texted back to ask her to come home so we could hash things out like mature adults. The "mature adults" part probably rankled her, because she never responded.

Later that night, after hours of tossing and turning and replaying every word of our argument, I grabbed my phone and tried to reach her again. The call went straight to voicemail.

I've been stewing ever since.

"I'm heading out."

I swivel away from the window to stare at my brother in the doorway. "Where're you going?"

"Where do you think? I'm going to Tokyo to oversee the Tech Fury app launch." Maverick cocks his head, frowning incredulously at me. "Don't tell me you forgot."

"Of course not," I mutter, forking a hand through my already mussed hair.

Maverick prowls closer, his eyes narrowed on my face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Have a good trip."

"Uh-uh. Not so fast." He perches on the corner of my desk, arms folded across his chest as he studies me. "Just yesterday you brokered a sweet nine-figure deal, and before that you were chilling on a tropical island with a hot young babe. You should feel on top of the world right now. So why do you look like someone just shit in your cornflakes?"

"I don't eat cornflakes," I grumble. "And you have a flight to catch."

“I’m not leaving till you tell me what’s bugging you.”

I scowl. “You have a bad habit of being late—”

“Fuck you. Start talking.”

After a few seconds of us glaring at each other, I curse under my breath and fall back against my seat. “I had a fight with Marlowe.”

“Seriously? You lovebirds just got back from your quasi-honeymoon. What the hell did you fight about?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Then hurry up and start talking.”

I shoot him another scowl.

He laughs. “C’mon. Out with it. What happened?”

“Harlan happened.”

Just hearing his name instantly darkens Maverick’s expression. “What’d that motherfucker do this time?”

“He was the guest lecturer for Marlowe’s class yesterday. I went up there to take her to dinner to celebrate the biotech contract. When I saw her walking out with Harlan ... hell, I just lost it.”

“With good fucking reason. What happened?”

I tell him about the tense confrontation and the ensuing showdowns with Marlowe and Laurene.

“Shit,” he says grimly. “Both Harlan *and* your ex are causing trouble? Talk about a double whammy.”

“Tell me about it,” I growl with renewed anger.

“Pretty damn convenient that Harlan showed up in Marlowe’s class, of all places.”

“It wasn’t a coincidence,” I say darkly. “I spoke to Oscar, our mutual acquaintance who recorded the video of Marlowe’s performance. When he chatted her up at the party, she told him she was attending grad school at UT. He must’ve mentioned this to Harlan, not realizing he’d run with it.”

Maverick snorts. “Of course he ran with it. He’s been plotting his next move ever since we saw him last summer at Sun Valley.” He’s referring to an invite-only conference attended by tech giants and media moguls. “Remember how pissed he was when our panel drew twice the crowd his did? He had a damn meltdown, went on that epic rant that got leaked to the press.”

I smile narrowly at the memory. “’Twas a thing of beauty.”

“Yes indeed.” Maverick chuckles a few moments longer before sobering. “You can’t let that evil bastard get his clutches in Marlowe. He’ll destroy her just for the sick thrill of it.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I lean back in my chair, grinding my jaw. I feel a killing rage at the thought of Marlowe working for Harlan. Spending time alone with him. Falling prey to his deceptive charm.

Maverick eyes me sympathetically.

“I think I fucked up,” I mumble. “I didn’t handle the situation well, and now Marlowe thinks I’m an overbearing hypocrite who wants to have his cake and eat it, too.”

Maverick’s jaw drops in disbelief. “Who are you and what have you done with my twin?”

I glare at him. “Very funny. I’m being serious.”

“So am I. The Gunner Ransom I shared a womb with rarely second-guesses himself.”

I scowl. “You make me sound like an intransigent asshole.”

“You *are* an intransigent asshole, but that’s never been an issue for you until now.” He appraises me with a mixture of humor and amazement. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

“She means a lot to me,” I admit in a quiet voice. “I don’t want to lose her.”

“Then don’t,” Maverick says. “Cutting ties with Laurene was a necessary step in the right direction. If you want a serious relationship with Marlowe, prove it to her. Romantic

getaways and expensive gifts are hella nice, but she's clearly the type of woman who needs more than grand gestures. And that's a damn good thing."

I look at Maverick for a long moment, then drag a hand down my face and blow out a heavy breath. "Thanks for the pep talk."

"Hey, what are brothers for?"

I smile faintly. He's more than just my brother. More than my best friend and right-hand man. He was there every step of the way, through the highs and lows, helping me build Pantheon into a multibillion-dollar empire. He's my fucking rock, and I don't know what I'd ever do without him.

"You'd better get going," I say gruffly. "Text me when you land."

He gives me a lazy salute. "Aye, aye, captain."

Shortly after he leaves, my phone rings on the desk. When I answer, the caller identifies himself as a casino manager in Oklahoma.

"Your father's been here all night. Before he passed out at the blackjack table, he was bragging about his billionaire sons. We couldn't wake him up, so I went through his phone and got your number. I figured I'd best call you rather than the police."

"Thanks for the courtesy," I grit out, my temple pounding with every syllable. "I'm on my way."

I hang up and call my helicopter pilot to arrange a pickup. Then I call the head of security at Aspen Oaks and rip him a new asshole for allowing my father to sneak off the property.

When I'm done with him, I grab my suit jacket and storm out the door, stopping at Veronica's desk outside my office.

"Something's come up and I need to leave. You'll have to cancel my appointments today, reschedule the taping and chair the logistics meeting this afternoon."

"Yes, sir," Veronica says with her usual brisk efficiency.

“If you need anything, you can reach me on my cell.” I start to walk away, then double back. “About the flowers ...”

“Yes?”

“Send three dozen white roses with Hawaiian orchids.”

Veronica smiles a wise, knowing smile. “Excellent choice.”

Chapter Thirty



GUNNER

NINETY MINUTES LATER, I'M STILL FUMING when I arrive at the WinStar Casino near the Texas-Oklahoma border.

The casino manager was kind enough to put my father up in one of their hotel rooms. I pay the bill and give him a ten-thousand-dollar tip, a reward for his discretion. He thanks me profusely and promises to alert me right away if my wayward old man ever shows up again.

When I reach the room, I find dear old dad sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. He looks so pathetic that my gut curdles in shame and disgust.

As I enter the room, he glances up and smiles feebly in my direction. "Hey there, son. They told me you were comin' for me." His East Texas drawl is always more pronounced when he's drunk. "Looks like I fell off the wagon again."

"No shit." I shake my head at him. "Same damn song and dance."

He cackles, squinting up at me as I reach the bed. His blue eyes are bloodshot, his clothes are wrinkled and he reeks of cheap whiskey.

I glare down at him with seething contempt. "Get up."

He struggles to stand, but he's too shitfaced to manage the task.

With an impatient curse, I bend down, pick him up and toss him over my shoulder. I'm shocked at how light he is. He can't weigh no more than a prepubescent boy. He's fucking wasting away.

Concern wells up inside me, but I harden my heart against it. Pity is a luxury I can't afford and a privilege he doesn't deserve.

"Let's go," I mutter, striding to the door.

"Nice suit," he slurs. "Armani?"

"William Westmancott," I grind out. "Cost me seventy-five grand. If you puke on it, I swear to God I'll slit your throat and leave you bleeding right here."

He makes a rattling sound that could be a laugh or a sob.

I carry him out to the front entrance, where the valet is waiting with the Jaguar I drove from the heliport. I dump my father unceremoniously in the passenger seat, crouching down to buckle him in like a damn child.

Before I close the door, he reaches out and clasps my cheek in his callused palm. "You're a good boy, Gunner. You make your old man proud."

"Spare me the sentimental bullshit." I slam the door and stalk around the car, tearing off my suit jacket and tossing it onto the backseat before sliding behind the wheel.

My father looks at the carelessly discarded garment and raises an eyebrow at me. "Seventy-five grand, huh?"

I scowl. "Be quiet."

He cackles drunkenly as we pull away from the sprawling casino. "Where's your driver? You give him the slip?"

I snort. "You know all about that, don't you?" I'm gripping the steering wheel so hard my knuckles are white. "What the hell were you thinking sneaking off to a damn casino?"

He throws me a sullen look. "I wanted a little taste of freedom. You and your brother have me locked away in that old people's village—"

“For your own good,” I tersely remind him.

He crosses his arms, his lower lip jutting out stubbornly. “I feel like a caged bird—”

“I DON’T GIVE A SHIT!” I explode. “You’re a goddamn wrecking ball, a danger to yourself and the public! You forfeited the right to freedom the day you got behind the wheel drunk out of your mind! If I hadn’t called in a favor, you’d be sitting in jail right now. I saved your ass, old man, so how about a little fucking gratitude?”

He slumps into the seat, his head falling back against the headrest. He remains morosely silent as I head toward the heliport.

Just when I think he’s fallen asleep, his head lolls to the side, his unfocused eyes watching me.

I stare straight ahead, grinding my teeth together until my jaw aches. When I can’t take another second of his silent scrutiny, I bite out, “What?”

He says nothing for several moments, his expression growing thoughtful. “Are you happy, son?”

I scowl. “What kind of question is that?”

“An honest one.” He turns to stare out the windshield, a burst of razor-sharp lucidity breaking through his alcoholic haze. “I had it made when I worked at Chevron. I was on top of the world, earning more money than I’d ever dreamed of. But it wasn’t enough. I wasn’t happy.” He looks at me. “I know you aren’t either.”

“You don’t know shit,” I snarl.

“Ah, but I do, son. I can see it in your eyes. The restlessness. The emptiness that can’t be filled with material possessions. I recognize the signs because it was the same way with me—”

“Stop talking.”

He ignores me. “I left home at seventeen looking for fame and fortune. I had a chip on my shoulder the size of Texas and I thought the whole world was against me. I wanted to prove

that I was more than poor white trash from a backwoods town, and that's what drove me to succeed." His voice roughens, guilt lacing his next words. "I know how hard it was for you and your brother when we lost everything. Your prep school friends turned their backs on you. Every door that had been opened to you before was suddenly slammed in your face. My downfall humiliated you. Angered you. Hardened you—"

"Be quiet."

He keeps talking. "You and your brother have built an empire in Silicon Hills. You're the dynamic duo. The twin tech titans. You've achieved success beyond your wildest dreams, and you've silenced every critic who ever doubted you. But as you survey your kingdom from the mountaintop every morning, you're realizing more and more that it's not enough. There's something missing in your life, Gunner, and you're not gonna be happy until you find it."

I'm gritting my teeth so hard my cranium throbs.

"*Now* I'm finished." He closes his eyes, folds his hands across his stomach and promptly falls asleep.

HIS WORDS HAUNT ME THROUGHOUT THE trip home.

As the helicopter swoops in low over my estate, I look out the window to see Marlowe sitting on the lawn under an old oak tree. Her head is bent over a textbook, her dark hair falling forward to curtain her face.

The sight of her makes something twist inside me. Which puts me in an even darker mood.

My father wakes up and groggily looks around. "What're we doing here?" he mumbles.

"You're staying with me until Aspen Oaks gets their shit together. I'm not paying a fortune for lax security."

"But—"

"No buts. You're staying."

As the helicopter lands on the front lawn, Mr. Leland hurries over to open the door. I climb out and clap him on the

shoulder, yelling above the chopper's whirring blades, "Is his room ready?"

"Most certainly, sir."

"Good." I help my father out of the helicopter. He's still unsteady on his feet, but when I try to pick him up, he pushes me away and grumbles, "I can walk."

"That's a new development." Disregarding his scowl, I guide his arm around my shoulders, clamp an arm around his waist and start toward the house.

Marlowe meets us halfway, the wind from the rotors whipping her hair around her face as the helicopter takes off.

"Well, well, well." Dad looks her up and down and grins lecherously. "And who's this pretty little lady?"

"None of your concern," I growl warningly.

Marlowe falls in step beside me. "Do you need any help?"

"No," I snap. "Go back to your studying."

She flinches at the rebuff.

"Now, son, that's no way to talk to a lady," my father chides. "I raised you better than that."

I bark a harsh laugh and drag him up the front steps.

Mrs. Calder meets us at the door, her eyes full of worry. "Oh, Dale."

His expression softens when he sees her. "Hey there, Gemma Louise."

She clucks her tongue in disappointment and lays her hand on his cheek. "Stubborn old fool. When will you ever learn?"

He scowls and waves her off, his face reddening with shame.

She trails after us. "Do you need—"

"I've got it under control." I want to preserve my father's dignity, or what's left of it.

As I steer him to the elevator, he droops and wobbles and mumbles incoherently. When we finally reach his bedroom on the second floor, he shoves away from me and scurries to the bathroom. He barely reaches the toilet in time.

I stand in the doorway with my arms crossed, grimly watching him hurl his guts into the bowl.

When he's finally done, the smart toilet flushes automatically. He gives it a confounded look and mutters something about "fancy-schmancy crappers" before slumping against the wall and dragging the back of his hand across his mouth.

"You smell like shit," I say flatly.

"Feel like it, too," he mumbles, closing his eyes.

He looks so weak and defeated that for a moment I feel like I'm thirteen again, taking care of him after one of his drunken benders.

Don't leave me, Gunny boy. Help your old man get sober before your ma wakes up. This'll be the last time, I swear.

As the familiar resentment surges inside me, I stalk over to the double sink, squeeze toothpaste onto a toothbrush and order him to brush his teeth.

He gives me a bleary look and then crawls across the floor to take the toothbrush, grunting heavily as I pull him to his feet. He can barely stand on his own, hunching over the sink while I run a hot bath for him.

When he's done brushing, I help him undress and guide him to the tub.

His sad blue eyes stare up at me as I bathe him with clinical detachment. Before the water turns cool, I assist him out of the tub, towel him dry and help him into clean pajamas that swallow him up.

As I tuck him into bed and pull the covers over him, he mumbles appreciatively, "Sheets feel good ... nice thread count ..." His voice tapers off as his eyes close.

I lean over him, silently appraising his hollow cheeks and the deep crinkles around his eyes. My chest burns with a soul-deep anger and sorrow.

“What’s wrong with you, old man?” I whisper tightly. “What’s eating you alive?”

His eyes drift open to meet mine. “I could ask you the same thing.”

I stiffen at his unexpected reply. We stare at each other, his gaze searing into me as if to peel away every protective shield I’ve erected over the years.

After an interminable silence, I step back and turn to leave.

“Gunner.”

I stop without turning around, my hands flexing impotently at my sides.

“Thank you,” he says humbly.

I swallow hard and nod curtly. Just as I reach the door, his reedy voice halts me again.

“That girl ... your pretty maid you took to Kauai ...”

I keep my back to him, my hand on the doorknob. “What about her?” I say through gritted teeth.

“I saw the pictures. Saw the way you looked at her.” He pauses for a long moment. “I think she’s your holy grail ... the missing piece you’ve been looking for.”

Every muscle in my body tightens.

“Don’t let her get away, son. If you do, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life. Take my word for it.”

I close my eyes, my hand gripping the doorknob hard enough to crush it.

“Gunn? You hear what I said?”

“I heard you.” My jaw is clenched so tight the words are barely audible.

“You should—”

“Go to sleep.” I walk out the door without another word, slamming it behind me.

Chapter Thirty-One



MARLOWE

SLEEP EVADES ME THAT NIGHT.

I lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling and thinking of Gunner. I've replayed our argument over and over in my mind, dissecting it from every angle and wishing futilely that the outcome could have been different.

When I saw him today, I could tell how much he was hurting from his father's latest relapse. I could see the pain and anger in his eyes, hear it in his strained voice.

After getting his father settled in, he'd retreated to his study and closed the door, remaining there for the rest of the evening. I wanted to go to him and make sure he was okay. I wanted to tell him I was there for him, ready to offer comfort or just be a sounding board. But I didn't think he'd want to see me, and his rejection would have been too devastating in my fragile emotional state.

I roll onto my side and stare bleakly out the window. I wonder if he's sleeping right now, or lying wide awake like me.

I wonder if I've consumed his thoughts as much as he's consumed mine.

I wonder if he misses me as badly as I miss him.

Around midnight I finally give up on sleep and crawl out of bed, throw on a robe and tiptoe downstairs.

The mansion is full of moon shadows, silence echoing through the halls. I can almost hear myself breathing as I roam around, restless as a ghost, eventually ending up in the living room. I'm drawn to the grand piano, gleaming like a beacon in the moonlight.

I sit on the piano bench and slowly trail my fingers along the keys without pressing down. The main bedrooms are tucked away in a separate wing, and the living room is soundproofed. So I don't have to worry about waking the whole house if I play a song.

Biting my lip, I press middle C with my thumb. The single note rings out, evocatively pure and sweet. I stroke another key, holding it down as sorrow unfurls inside me like a fragile ribbon.

Closing my eyes, I let my fingers slide over the ivory keys, picking out the solemn notes from the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

I play quietly, letting the music soak into me, every note deepening my melancholy.

I feel him before I see him.

The air shifts around me, and the skin on the back of my neck prickles with awareness.

And then he's standing right behind me, his body warm against my back.

I continue playing the piano, my heart punching at my ribs.

He sits down, straddling the bench so that he's facing me. He doesn't say a word. Just stares down at my hands moving over the keyboard as Beethoven's haunting melody drifts through the room and fills the space between us.

After an endless moment, he reaches out and ghosts a hand over my hair.

I look at him, breathless.

He returns my gaze. The intensity in his eyes nearly unravels me.

Swallowing tightly, I turn away from him and start playing the second movement of the sonata.

He listens for a few moments, then brushes my hair off my shoulder and lowers his face to the side of my neck. His breath is warm and uneven against my skin, sending a rush of goose bumps down my arms.

I can feel the heavy sadness shrouding him. The weight of it wraps around my heart, invisible fingers squeezing my throat until I have to stop playing.

As complete silence envelops the room, he presses his lips against my skin, just below my ear.

I shiver at the sensation, my breath catching in my throat.

Slowly he lifts his head from my shoulder, his blue eyes glittering like sapphires in the moonlight.

With shaking fingers, I reach out and touch his stubble-darkened cheek, my eyes lost in his. I feel so much for him in this moment. Too much to contain.

He leans in slowly, the heat of his breath warming my mouth before he brushes his lips over mine.

A soft, helpless moan escapes me and floats through the air.

The sound seems to unleash something in him, because he clasps my waist in his hands and lifts me onto his lap so that our bodies are pressed close together, my legs straddling him on the bench.

Holding me tight, he crushes his mouth to mine in a kiss of such raw, aching need that my blood sings in my veins, igniting my entire body. Whimpering his name, I rake my fingers through the silky strands of his hair, deepening the kiss while grinding my pussy against his thigh.

He makes a guttural sound, low and thrillingly rough.

My heart thunders in my ears as he drags my robe off my shoulders and pulls off my nightshirt in one deft sweep. With a look of fierce purpose, he whips his T-shirt over his head and throws it to the floor with the other discarded garments. Then

he takes my mouth again, parting my lips with the hot thrust of his tongue. I gasp at the pleasure of it and cling to his shoulders, caught in a swirling storm of emotions and sensations.

I hear a snap as he tears away my lace boy shorts, and then he plunges two fingers inside me. My spine arches and my belly ripples as he strokes my slick flesh, increasing the pressure with his thumb on my clit. Hot arcs of heat claw through my body, blurring my vision.

Letting my head fall back, I release a throaty groan when he sucks my aching breast into his mouth. I ride his hand, my breath coming out in shuddery gasps as my hips twist and grind against him, the bench rocking beneath our weight.

He sucks hard on my nipple while his thumb rubs my clit and his fingers pump inside me, curling against my G-spot with every stroke. I rock my hips faster, my body coiling tighter and tighter until an orgasm overtakes me, making me cry out.

Gunner growls darkly as my muscles clench viciously around his fingers, every nerve in my body sizzling. I bite into his shoulder to muffle a wail as my climax stretches on and on, pulsing through me like waves and making my thighs tremble against his.

My pussy is still spasming when he withdraws his fingers and licks them clean of my juices, his expression carnal.

“Oh God,” I whimper, closing my eyes.

He slams the piano lid shut and lifts me on top of it. I gasp, my legs wrapping around his hips as he shoves his pants down over his ass. I hear the smack of his cock springing into his palm, then he fills me in one long forceful stroke.

I let out a sob of pleasure and cross my ankles behind his back. Buried impossibly deep, he begins thrusting into me with a barely restrained edge of violence. His fingers dig into my thighs, holding me tight to him as he fucks me with deep, urgent strokes. The impact of his big body slamming against mine makes my heart ricochet in my chest.

Gazing into his fierce eyes, I slip my free hand around the back of his neck and pull his mouth down to mine. He growls low in his throat, a sound of primitive hunger that reverberates through every inch of me.

I press my needy body against his, straining to bring us even closer. When I clutch his flexing ass cheek, his cock swells and he groans into our kiss.

His hips snap faster, rocking me against the piano's smooth surface as he pounds into me, taking his pleasure from my body while exorcising his demons.

Our tongues tangle feverishly, every thrust of his hips driving my heels into his back. The hot, wet sound of our skin slapping together fills the moonlit room, an erotic symphony like no other.

I moan and cling tightly to him, the scent of raw sex in the air driving me wild. When we explode together, he throws back his head with a pained groan, his hot seed flooding my body in thick spurts. I bury my scream in his chest, quaking with pleasure as my nails score the flesh of his ass.

Long moments later, I slump against him, the tension ebbing from my body. He's breathing hard, his mouth open on my neck as he cradles me to him. His cock is still throbbing inside me, extending my orgasm and sending little aftershocks along my spine.

As my eyes flutter closed, I walk my fingers up and down his sweaty back, soothing and caressing him as our breathing slowly evens out. When he murmurs my name, I realize it's the first time he's spoken, and somehow that makes our encounter even hotter.

Lifting his head, he smooths my hair back from my face. With a languid sigh, I drop my forehead on his shoulder, my legs draped limply around his waist.

"I was rough with you," he says gruffly after a long silence. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"You didn't." *Not tonight anyway.*

He brushes a kiss across my cheek. Tingling warmth climbs up from my toes to spread through my veins.

“Thank you for the flowers,” I say quietly. “They were beautiful but ... unnecessary.”

I feel his throat bob as he swallows roughly. “I’m sorry for being such an asshole to you. The last thing I ever want to do is cause you pain.”

My throat grows thick with emotion, and I swallow it down.

Then he slides his mouth to my ear and whispers, “I’m fucking crazy about you, sweetheart.”

My heart goes wild, tears pricking my eyes. “I’m crazy about you, too,” I whisper back.

He tunnels his fingers into my hair and pulls my face up to his for a searing kiss that melts away some of my anxiety.

We both come away breathless and panting, our foreheads resting against each other’s.

“Come on,” he whispers, his cock thickening inside me. “Let’s take this reunion upstairs before someone walks in on us and gets an eyeful.”

AFTER TWO MORE ROUNDS OF LOVEMAKING, we lay together in a tangle of damp sheets, my head nestled on his chest as his hand strokes up and down my sweat-slicked back.

“I missed you,” he husks.

Pleasure warms my insides. “I missed you, too.”

“These past two days have been pure hell without you. Don’t ever leave me again, Marlowe. I can’t take it.”

His words pull at my heartstrings. “I didn’t want to leave. I just ... I needed some space. I was hurt—”

“I know, baby.” He buries his lips in my hair. “I’m sorry for hurting you. Seeing you with Harlan really fucked me up, but that doesn’t excuse the way I treated you.”

I feel myself softening even more. “Maybe I overreacted a little. You were obviously very upset—”

“I was, but I should’ve handled myself better.”

“Same goes for me. I should’ve stayed and talked things through instead of running off to Quinn’s. I won’t do that again.”

He presses another kiss to the top of my head, whispering endearments I can’t quite catch.

After a minute, I prop my chin on his chest and search his face quietly. “Why do you hate Harlan so much?”

His eyes darken with suppressed anger. “We have history.”

Clearly. “What kind of history?”

I feel the increased tension in his body, but he doesn’t respond.

“Please stop shutting me out, Gunner,” I plead in frustration. “This relationship won’t work if we keep secrets from each other.”

He clenches his jaw as he holds my gaze. After a few moments, he reluctantly starts talking. “When I acquired my energy company two years ago, Harlan led a campaign to short our stock. It tanked the price and cost us millions. Took months for the company to recover.”

“That’s awful,” I murmur in disbelief. “Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s a vindictive son of a bitch. Always has been.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Too fucking long,” Gunner says darkly. “We went to the same high school in Dallas, and our grandparents ran in the same social circles and belonged to the same country club. Harlan resented me and my brother because we were more popular than him despite being newcomers. He enjoyed starting rumors about us, and he never missed an opportunity

to remind people that our father was a disgraced drunkard who bankrupted our family.”

I frown. “What a raging asshole.”

“Among other things.” Gunner pauses, his jaw tightening even more. “During our junior year, I slept with his girlfriend. He’d been a thorn in our side since the day we met, and I wanted to inflict some pain of my own. So when his girlfriend hit on me at a party, I took her upstairs and fucked her. When Harlan found out the next day, he was furious. So furious that he retaliated by banging my mother.”

I gasp in shock. “Your *mother*?”

Gunner nods tightly, glaring at the ceiling. “He came on to her at a holiday charity gala. She was feeling lonely and vulnerable, and she’d had one too many drinks that night. So she welcomed Harlan’s attention. They snuck off together and checked into a hotel. The next day he couldn’t wait to track me down to tell me what he’d done. He bragged about how desperate she was, how she begged for it. Said he taped the whole thing.” Gunner’s hand balls into a fist against my back before he snarls, “I beat the shit out of him, but that wasn’t enough. I wanted to kill him. I almost did.”

A shiver ripples down my spine. “What happened?”

“He threatened to leak the tape.”

“Oh, my God.”

“He was eighteen, so legally my mother was safe. But the scandal would have rocked our family and destroyed her reputation. If word got out that she slept with a high school student—and a sex tape existed—she would’ve been too humiliated to ever show her face in public again. There’s also a very good chance my grandparents would have disowned her.”

“Wow,” I whisper, staring at Gunner. “What did you do?”

“I hacked into his phone and computer to erase the video. While poking around, I found evidence that he’d been stealing exams from teachers for two whole years. I copied the incriminating files, then drove straight to his house and

showed him the dirt I'd uncovered. He was speechless. I told him if he ever breathed a word about sleeping with my mother, I'd get him suspended for cheating. I also promised to notify the admissions office of every college and university he'd ever thought of applying to. By the time I was done with him, he'd be lucky to get accepted into a certificate course." A menacing half smile curls Gunner's lips. "He took me at my word. And that was the end of our high school feud."

"Holy shit," I breathe, both awed and shocked by his ruthlessness. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

He gives a humorless chuckle. "The pathetic bastard waited ten years to rekindle our beef. After he shorted my company's stock, I reached out to a friend at the Securities and Exchange Commission. He paid Harlan a little visit and ... Let's just say he'll think twice before tampering with any of my companies again."

"Good. Serves him right."

Gunner strokes my hair, his eyes boring into mine. "He might have been deterred from waging more economic battles against me, but that doesn't mean he won't use another attack strategy. It wasn't a coincidence that he spoke to your class. He's my enemy and he'll stop at nothing to hurt me, including going after you. Can you see that now?"

"I do. And I'll keep my distance from him. Gladly."

Gunner's eyes soften in approval before he pulls me closer. I resettle my head on his chest, placing my hand over his heart. He kisses the top of my head and resumes stroking my back.

After a few moments, I ask quietly, "How did your mom feel about Harlan threatening to expose their one-night stand?"

Gunner stiffens at the question. "I never told her."

"She doesn't know? Even after all these years?"

"She doesn't need to know. I handled it."

The bite in his tone gives me pause.

"You're probably right. Some things are better left in the past," I murmur, tracing his nipple with my finger. "But if she

knew what you did for her, protecting her the way you did, I'm sure it would mean a lot to her. She might even—”

“Treat me better? Love me more?” His voice holds a hard cynical edge. “She wouldn't.”

He speaks with such certainty that my heart breaks for him. I kiss his chest and stroke his rigid jaw, silently offering comfort as he stares out the windows at the moonlight shimmering on the dark lake.

“I've been thinking a lot about Kauai,” he says quietly after a moment. “I'd give anything to be there with you right now.”

“I feel the same. So, so much.” I tip my head back to kiss his chin, smiling when his beard stubble tickles my lips, thicker than the usual amount. “You haven't been shaving.”

“Haven't felt like it.”

“*Tsk-tsk*, Mr. CEO. Totally unacceptable.”

His lips curve into an almost smile.

Sobering after a moment, I say softly, “I'm sorry your father had a relapse. I know how difficult that must have been for you.”

“Not as difficult as it's gonna be for him,” Gunner mutters with dark satisfaction. “He's gonna feel like shit when he wakes up, and I couldn't be fucking happier about that.”

I can't suppress a smile. “Mrs. Calder told me he rented a Rolls-Royce limo and bribed several staff members to look the other way while he absconded to a casino.”

Gunner grunts in disgust. “That's why we're decreasing his monthly allowance. He clearly has too much money and time on his hands. Anyway, I don't want to talk about him anymore. I've had enough of his bullshit for one day.”

We fall silent for a while, each lost in our own private thoughts. There's so much I want to say, so much I still need to hear from him.

I finally break the silence. “Gunner?”

“What, baby?” he murmurs.

“How did you propose to Laurene?”

His body tenses beneath me, and I swallow.

“What do you mean?” he says slowly.

“Where did you propose to her?”

“Why does it matter?”

“I just want to know. I’m curious.”

There’s a long pause. He’s deliberating over his answer, weighing the potential impact of his words.

“I proposed over dinner at her favorite restaurant,” he finally says. “We had an official engagement party a month later at her parents’ estate on Martha’s Vineyard.”

I trace his collarbone with my fingertips. “When you proposed, did you get down on one knee?”

He hesitates, then shakes his head. “We’d been discussing marriage for a while, so my proposal didn’t come as a complete surprise.”

“Did she cry?”

“No.” There’s a wry note in his voice. “She’s not the sentimental type.”

“But she was happy?”

“Very,” he murmurs.

I fall silent, processing his words.

I hate that I let Laurene get to me the way she did. I hate that even now, lying in Gunner’s arms, I’m insanely jealous of her. I hate that she met him first. Hate that she touched him, stroked him, made love to him before me. I hate that she won his heart, to the extent that he asked her to marry him.

I hate her. Period.

Uncomfortable with my prolonged silence, Gunner whispers, “Say something.”

“Like what?”

“Anything.”

I swallow tightly. “You were going to spend the rest of your life with her.”

The muscles in his jaw flex. “That was the plan.”

“Are you ... do you still love her?”

He goes silent.

I wait for his answer, my heart thudding painfully against my ribs.

His chest rises and falls on a deep exhale. “It’s complicated.”

Disappointment slashes through me. “So I’ll take that as a yes.”

“No.” He pauses, choosing his next words carefully. “I don’t know if I ever did. Love her, I mean.”

I lift myself onto one elbow and look down at him, searching his face. “Why did you propose if you didn’t love her?”

“Like I said ... it’s complicated.”

I don’t know what to make of that.

He pushes his hand into my hair, cupping the back of my head as he stares intently into my eyes. “You have nothing to worry about. Laurene and I are over, and I made that crystal clear to her. She won’t be a problem for us, I swear to you.”

Relief floods through me, tingling from head to toe. “Can you change the security code—”

“Already did. Even if she’s foolish enough to show up here again, she won’t get past the front gate.”

Satisfied with his response, I climb on top of him, straddling his hips. He settles his hands on my thighs and stares up at me with those ocean-deep eyes.

“Sweetheart—”

“I love you.” Watching his gaze darken, I plunge bravely ahead. “You don’t have to say it back. In fact I don’t want you

to, not right now, because I'd just end up wondering if you only said it to appease me." I take his hand and place it over my galloping heart. "I've never been in love before. Frankly, I'm scared shitless. But I can't run from my feelings anymore. I love you, Gunner, and I'm yours for as long as you'll have me."

With a rough sound of longing, he flips me over and pins me beneath him, his forehead pressed to mine. The fierce look in his eyes could be love, or something very close to it. Whatever it is, it takes my breath away.

"Do you have any idea how much I need you?" he says, his voice raspy with emotion. "I prayed for you without even knowing you were possible. You're the girl of my dreams, the best damn thing that's ever happened to me. I'm never letting you go."

As a rush of happiness washes over me, I take his face in my hands and whisper, "There's nowhere else I'd rather be than right here with you."

"That means everything to me. *You* mean everything to me." He kisses my mouth, staring into my eyes as he whispers, "Don't ever forget that. Okay, baby? Never fucking forget."

Chapter Thirty-Two



MARLOWE

LINGERING MEMORIES OF OUR REUNION HAVE me humming to myself while completing my chores the next day.

Last night's makeup session was everything I needed and then some. Gunner and I talked and made love into the wee hours of the morning, eventually falling asleep in each other's arms. When the alarm went off, we showered and dressed together, then headed downstairs for a leisurely breakfast.

As I saw him off to work, I knew we'd reached an important milestone in our relationship, and I had no more doubts that we belonged together.

A sudden tap on my shoulder startles me into dropping the furniture polish I just sprayed on an already gleaming table. I stop the bottle from rolling to the floor, then spin around to see Gunner's father standing there.

Flustered, I yank out my earbuds. "Mr. Ransom."

"Sorry, honey. Didn't mean to frighten you." His rascally grin lacks even a trace of remorse.

"Can I get you anything?" I offer.

"Just wanted to formally introduce myself. My son forgot his manners yesterday and, well, I wasn't exactly in top form." He thrusts out his hand. "Dale Ransom."

I quickly remove my rubber cleaning gloves and shake his hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Ransom. I'm Marlowe

Somerset.”

“Pleasure’s all mine.” He kisses the back of my hand, his eyes twinkling. “No wonder my son is so smitten. And make no mistake, honey, he *is* smitten.”

My cheeks heat with a blush.

Dale Ransom is tall and thin, his angular face carved with deep grooves and dark shadows above his cheekbones. Despite his gaunt features, he’s strikingly handsome. His black hair is still thick, though graying at the temples. His eyes are a piercing blue beneath heavy brows.

I’m struck again by how much Gunner resembles the man. It’s a little scary.

Sansa, who had been sunbathing in the bay window, leaps down from her perch to sniff at Gunner’s father.

He gives her a broad grin. “Well, who do we have here?”

I smile. “That’s Sansa.”

“Hello there, Sansa.” Dale crouches down to stroke the cat’s head. When she rubs against his hand, he laughs gruffly and scratches behind her ears.

I can’t hide my surprise. “She usually doesn’t take to strangers.”

Dale grins at the purring cat. “You have great taste in humans, purty lady. Get it? *Purr-ty?*”

I laugh at the joke, and he winks at me. He’s very charming, I’ll give him that.

“I understand you’re a grad student at Gunner’s alma mater,” he says.

“I am,” I confirm, smiling. “I would’ve had class this morning, but my professor had to cancel for a personal emergency.”

“Is that so? Well—”

“I hope you’re not bothering Marlowe.”

We both turn to see Mrs. Calder striding into the room with a small tray.

Dale rises to his feet, his mouth softening into a smile that shaves a good ten years off his face. “Mornin’, Gemma Louise. How ya doing?”

“A heap better than you, I bet,” she retorts. “You look like roadkill run over by an eighteen-wheeler.”

He scowls, but there’s no bite to it and his eyes are twinkling. “I just met your new furry friend.” He motions to Sansa shamelessly winding herself around his legs. “Reminds me of Gingersnap. Remember how much that ol’ gal adored me?”

“Of course I remember. And her name was Ginger.”

“That’s what *you* called her. I called her Gingersnap, God rest her ornery soul.”

The two old friends share a reminiscent smile before Mrs. Calder clears her throat and holds up the tray.

“Brought you some tea to help shake that nasty hangover. Why don’t you join me in the sunroom so Marlowe can finish her chores.” Her tone makes it clear it’s not a request.

Dale grins at her. “Just as bossy as ever.”

She harrumphs. “*Somebody* needs to keep you in line.”

“Ah, Gemma Louise,” he says fondly, brushing back a strand of hair that had escaped her bun. “Don’t ever change.”

I stare in shock as a delicate pink flush spreads over her cheeks. Holy crap. Mrs. Calder is blushing. Actually *blushing*.

She catches me gawking and briskly clears her throat. “We’ll let you get back to work. Come along now, Dale.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He takes the tray from her hands and tosses me a wink. “We’ll chat more later.”

“Not if your son has anything to say about it,” Mrs. Calder warns.

Dale merely chortles.

Grinning, I watch the pair walk off together, Sansa trotting after them.

Two hours later, I've just finished vacuuming the parlor when a pair of strong arms wraps around my waist and a deep voice rumbles in my ear, "Hello, beautiful."

Every nerve cell in my body comes alive, zinging with heat and awareness. "Is this who I think it is?" I tease.

"Damn well better be." One big hand splays across my belly as he holds me against his hard chest while nibbling the side of my neck. "You smell good."

I let out a breathless laugh. "I guess pine cleaner and *eau de sweat* do it for you."

"Everything about you does it for me."

I grin with pleasure and turn in the circle of his arms, smiling into his gorgeous blues. "What're you doing home so early?"

He smiles. "I decided to work from home the rest of the day."

"Did you, now?" I purr, looping my arms around his neck. "I guess it pays to be the boss, doesn't it?"

"That's right." He reaches out and brushes the pad of his thumb along the corner of my lips. My heart does a little flutter and my stomach flip-flops.

Unable to resist, I open my mouth and draw his thumb inside. His eyes darken and his smile takes on a decidedly wicked slant.

I draw his thumb deeper, curling my tongue around it and sucking hard. His cock jerks against my belly and he groans.

I release him with a naughty laugh and turn back to the vacuum cleaner.

"You little tease." He moves behind me, planting tiny kisses along my nape where my hair meets skin. Delicious tingles race down my spine, and I lean back against him with a blissful sigh.

He pushes his hands into my hair, loosening the pins securing my topknot. He makes an appreciative noise as my hair falls past my shoulders in soft waves. I melt like candy when he runs his fingers through the dark strands, spreading them across my back and breathing in the fruity scent of my shampoo.

“In case I’ve never told you,” he murmurs against my ear, “I love your hair. It’s gorgeous and it always smells amazing.”

“Thank you,” I whisper smilingly. “I feel the same about yours.”

Nuzzling my hair, he unties my apron and drops it on the antique sideboard, then takes my hand. “Let’s go for a walk in the garden.”

“I’d love to,” I say weakly, “but I haven’t finished—”

He gives me a stern look. “Are you defying your boss?”

I bite my lip and smile. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“Smart woman.” He leads me outside and into the garden, swinging our joined hands between us as we walk down a stone path, savoring the fragrant blooms everywhere.

“My foundation is hosting our annual scholarship awards ceremony next month,” he says casually. “Will you go with me?”

I stare at him, my heart thumping hard. “You ... you want to go public with our relationship?”

His mouth twitches in a wry smile. “That ship has already sailed, hasn’t it?”

Wincing at the reminder, I mutter under my breath, “Thanks a lot, TMZ.”

Gunner chuckles, lifting my hand to his lips. “I don’t care what the tabloids say about us. All that matters is the way we feel about each other. I want to be with you, Marlowe, and I’m more than happy to let the whole damn world know it.”

His words bring a lump to my throat. “Wow.”

He brushes his lips across my knuckles. “So will you be my date for the ceremony?”

I beam at him. “I’d be honored.”

His slow, pleased smile knocks the oxygen from my lungs. I’m so crazy about this man, completely head over heels.

As we come around the side of the house, we can see his father and Mrs. Calder through the sunroom windows. They’re sitting close together on the couch, sharing a quiet laugh.

The scene makes me smile. “They’ve been there all morning. Guess they had a lot of catching up to do.”

“Guess so,” Gunner murmurs.

We spy on the pair for a few moments.

“They love each other,” I say softly. “Not just as friends. They’re in love.”

“I know.”

I look at Gunner. “You do?”

He nods. “I didn’t always. As a kid, all I knew was that Mrs. Calder was my father’s closest friend. She made him laugh like no one else, and she didn’t take any shit from him. Watching them interact was always entertaining.”

“I bet,” I say with a grin. “I got a taste of it this morning. I love the way her East Texas accent comes out when she talks to your dad, and it’s so adorable the way he calls her Gemma Louise.”

Gunner chuckles as we resume walking hand in hand. “Maverick and I loved visiting her every summer. She was warm and nurturing, fun to be around. Sometimes we wished our mother was more like her.”

That doesn’t surprise me at all, but I keep the thought to myself. “Did she and your mom get along?”

“They were never friends, if that’s what you mean. They treated each other cordially, but every now and then Mom would make snide comments about Mrs. Calder, which gave me the impression that she wasn’t too thrilled about her

friendship with Dad. And I've always suspected that she got a cat simply because Mrs. Calder had one."

"Really? Was she jealous of her?"

"Probably," Gunner admits. "She rarely came with us when we visited Bullsboro, but I just figured she hated the town. Which she absolutely did. She called it a backwoods hellhole and a few other choice names I won't repeat."

"Ouch." I give him a rueful sidelong look. "So when did you figure out that your dad and Mrs. Calder were in love? Did something happen between them?"

"No. They never had an affair or anything like that." Gunner plucks a pink blossom from an overhanging branch and tucks it into my hair. We stare at each other as the late summer breeze washes over us, warm and scented with flowers.

"Mrs. Calder was happily married," he continues. "Though her husband was on the road a lot, she never would have cheated on him. And Dad, to his credit, cared about her too much to disrespect her marriage."

"That's good," I murmur.

Gunner nods. "Five years ago, shortly after she came to live with me, we threw a big backyard birthday party for her oldest grandson. At one point, I went inside to take a phone call. That's when I saw Dad and Mrs. Calder in the kitchen. They were hugging, which wasn't unusual. What stopped me in my tracks was the look on their faces. Pain. Regret. Yearning." He shakes his head slowly. "I stood there staring at them, and in that moment, everything crystallized for me. Suddenly I understood why Mom felt so threatened by their friendship, why she refused to let Mrs. Calder be our godmother. Suddenly I realized that my parents' marriage never really stood a chance, because Dad loved Mrs. Calder and always would. If she'd joined him in Houston all those years ago, he wouldn't have resorted to marrying a pampered debutante he wasn't compatible with."

“Wow,” I whisper, trying to absorb everything I’ve just heard. “That’s so heartbreaking, Gunner.”

He nods slowly. “I’ve never blamed my mother for the divorce. She wasn’t responsible for Dad’s infidelity and gambling, and there’s no guarantee he would have been a better husband to Mrs. Calder.”

“True,” I murmur. “He might have been happier with her. But if he’s prone to vices ...” I let the sentence go unfinished, watching Gunner nod in agreement.

“He has demons. Self-destructive tendencies he can’t seem to shake.” A shadow falls over Gunner’s eyes and his voice quiets until it’s just above a whisper. “Sometimes I look at him and I see ...” He trails off and I wait for him to complete the thought.

But he just stares ahead, suddenly lost in memories. “When Maverick and I were growing up, we worshipped the ground Dad walked on. He was larger than life—big and strong with a booming laugh you could hear from miles away. There wasn’t anything he couldn’t do. He roped cattle and rode horses like a seasoned cowboy. He chopped down trees to build our campfires. He built engines and raced cars just for the thrill of it. He was our hero,” Gunner says with a trace of bitterness. “Watching him deteriorate into a shell of his former self broke our damn hearts.”

I swallow hard, feeling a rush of love and compassion for him. When I tighten my fingers around his, he looks down at me, his expression softening.

“I know I just met your father, and I don’t want to speak out of turn,” I say quietly. “But underneath all those destructive layers, I think he has a good heart.”

Gunner gazes at me, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with my assessment.

Hoping to lighten his mood, I add impishly, “Even Sansa likes him.”

He scowls. “Damn traitor.”

I peal with laughter, turning his scowl into a smile.

We keep walking until we find shade beneath an arbor blanketed with wisteria and climbing roses.

When we turn to face each other, Gunner slides his fingers through my hair, gripping my head in that dominating way of his as he claims my mouth. The kiss starts out gentle but soon turns more heated. Hungry.

He twists his hand in my hair and holds me still as he plunders my mouth with his tongue. Heat curls through every muscle, fiber and cell in my body. Letting out a soft moan, I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers plunging into the thickness of his hair.

“God, what you do to me.” His lips move from mine, traveling to my jaw and neck. “You’re driving me fucking crazy.”

I lick his ear, making him shiver. “Do you have a maid fetish?”

“I didn’t before you came along.” He tongues the beating pulse at the base of my neck, sucking hard enough to leave a mark. “How the hell am I supposed to get any work done knowing you’re here waiting for me at the end of each day? You’re messing with my productivity.”

I grin. “Sorry.”

“Are you?” he grumbles. “I have my doubts.”

A bubble of laughter rises in my throat.

With a muttered threat, he palms my ass and lifts me against the arbor wall. I wrap my legs around his waist, gasping at the hardness of his cock pressed against my sensitive core. I hold him close to me, soaking up the warmth of his skin through his shirt.

He exhales my name and kisses me harder, his mouth grinding bruisingly against mine as his hands skate up my thighs, under my dress.

I moan as a scorching rush of pleasure rocks through my body. My nipples are hard and my clit is throbbing, hot juices spilling onto the silk of my panties.

He breaks the kiss just long enough to nuzzle my cheek and neck before finding my mouth again, groaning when my tongue tangles with his.

A throat clears loudly behind us.

Gunner tears his mouth from mine with a low curse.

“Uh, sorry to interrupt,” comes his father’s amused voice.

Mortified at getting caught, I bury my flaming face against Gunner’s chest. With my back against the trellised wall, all his dad can see are my legs wrapped around his son. Which is embarrassing enough.

“What do you want?” Gunner growls over his shoulder.

“I’m taking Gemma Louise to dinner tonight,” Dale announces. “Since I’m not allowed behind the wheel, I was thinking maybe your driver could take us. That is, if you’re not going anywhere else today.”

“What’s wrong with Mrs. Calder’s car?”

“Nothing at all. That’s a mighty fine Benz you bought her.”

“So what’s the problem?” Gunner says between clenched teeth.

Dale huffs indignantly. “I might be a drunk reprobate, but I’ll be damned if I let a woman drive on our date.”

I bite my lip, smothering a laugh against Gunner’s chest.

“Trace will drive you,” he grits out.

“Thank you, son. I appreciate it.”

“Anything else?”

When Dale doesn’t respond, I peek over Gunner’s shoulder to see his father sheepishly scuffing his boot toe against the ground.

Gunner’s jaw flexes as if he’s running out of patience. “Spit it out, old man.”

“I wanna take her to Adagio.”

“Adagio is booked six months in advance. You can’t get a reservation on such short notice.”

“No, but *you* can.”

Gunner shakes his head, muttering an exasperated oath that makes me grin harder.

Dale pleads his case. “She deserves a fine dining experience, the best in town. So what do you say, Gunn? Can you wrangle us a table?”

Gunner sighs. “Tell Mrs. Calder to call my assistant. She’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, son. Much obliged.” Dale grins slyly. “I’ll let you crazy kids get back to what you were doing. Watch out for thorns. Getting pricked could be a real mood killer.”

“Beat it, old man,” Gunner growls.

Dale cackles mischievously.

As soon as he leaves, I burst into giggles.

Gunner looks down at me, his annoyance giving way to warm affection. “Sorry about that.”

“No apology necessary. That was entertaining.”

“Glad you think so.” He pushes my hair out of my eyes, his touch as gentle as the fragrant wisteria brushing my cheek.

“Your dad reminded me of a teenager asking for the car keys. Talk about a role reversal, huh?”

Gunner grunts. “It’s been that way a long damn time.”

As sympathy stirs in my chest, I reach up and gently stroke his jaw. “You’re a good man, Gunner Ransom. My father would have liked you.”

He gazes at me with a fiercely earnest expression that betrays a surprising vulnerability. “Do you mean that?”

“I do.” I smile wryly. “He might not be too crazy about you ravishing me in your garden—”

Gunner laughs softly. Framing my face in his hands, he kisses me so tenderly that my heart aches and tears sting my

eyes.

No other man has ever made me feel as precious as this man makes me feel. I love him so much. Riotously, ferociously, with every beat of my heart and every breath in my lungs. It's the scariest, most thrillingly wonderful feeling in the world.

He brushes my lips with his once more, then lifts his head and smiles into my eyes. "What do you say we order takeout tonight and snuggle up with a movie?"

I smile radiantly. "Sounds like the perfect date."

Chapter Thirty-Three



MARLOWE

THE NEXT TWO WEEKS ARE BLISS.

Gunner leaves work early almost every day to have dinner with me. One evening when he can't get out of a prior commitment, I surprise him the next day with a picnic lunch at his office. After instructing his assistant not to disturb us under any circumstances, he locks the door and pounces on me.

When I emerge more than an hour later with mussed hair and buttons missing from my shirt, Veronica hides a knowing smile behind her computer.

When Gunner and I aren't feasting on each other or working out together, we have the most stimulating conversations about the economy, geopolitics, philosophy and literature. I play the piano for him, and he helps me with my class assignments. He creates and funds an investment portfolio for me, something I've always been too broke to accomplish. He's even teaching me Mandarin.

On the second weekend, we attend UT's homecoming game. Gunner and Maverick own a luxury suite with spectacular views of the football field. We're joined by a bunch of their college friends and fraternity brothers. The guys are uniformly attractive and successful, and all but one are single. Quinn would've been in seventh heaven if she were here, but sadly, she had to work.

I sit between Gunner and Maverick, beer in hand, watching as the enormous marching band parades onto the field with horns blaring and drums pounding. The packed stadium is a pulsating mass of burnt orange jerseys liberally sprinkled with pretty girls in cutoff shorts and cowboy boots.

We have an absolute blast cheering on the Longhorns. Every time the team scores, the stadium explodes with one hundred thousand fans screaming “Hook ’em, Horns!”

The relaxed camaraderie between Gunner, Maverick and their friends is a pleasure to watch. They laugh raucously, crack jokes and trade insults that make me blush. It’s another side of Gunner I’ve never seen before, and I find myself thoroughly enjoying it. Equally enjoyable are the stories about their college days that the fellas regale me with.

During these conversations, I often catch Gunner silently watching me. He seems to be observing my interactions with his friends, assessing how I fit into his world. Every time our eyes meet, he smiles enigmatically before looking away, leaving me to wonder what conclusion he reached.

At halftime we’re joined by Sedonia Larson, Pantheon’s CFO. She’s a gorgeous black woman with waist-length micro braids, almond-shaped eyes and a flawless brown complexion that can’t be achieved with any skincare product. Her dimpled smile is infectious, and a form-fitting pink dress shows off her amazing curves.

She’s a stunner, but it’s the man beside her who makes me do a double take. Tall, rangy and good-looking, he’s a dead ringer for Regé-Jean Page, the swoony heartthrob from *Bridgerton*.

I stare at him agog, making Sedonia laugh.

“Marlowe, this is my boyfriend, Luca. Otherwise known as Simon, the Duke of Hastings.”

I laugh, shaking his hand. “You must get tired of hearing how much you look like him.”

He grins. “It was much worse during the first season. But I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Don’t let him fool you,” Sedonia says with a laugh. “He *loves* being mistaken for a famous actor. People stop him on the street for an autograph or picture, and he’s always getting free stuff wherever he goes. One night when we were running late to a concert, he charmed his way out of a speeding ticket because the cop couldn’t stop drooling over him. If I hadn’t been sitting right there, she probably would’ve slipped him her number—or her panties.”

Maverick grins lecherously. “Sounds like the perfect setup for a hot threesome.” He claps Luca on the shoulder. “Damn, bro, you were robbed.”

Luca cough-laughes while Sedonia smacks Maverick in the chest.

“You’re such a whore,” she hisses.

He throws back his head and laughs. A few others join in, earning Sedonia’s death glare.

I hide a grin behind my hand. Gunner just shakes his head, lips twitching.

“Anyway,” Sedonia says pointedly, “we’d better get back to our suite. Luca has relatives visiting from Phoenix, and he doesn’t want them running up our bar tab while we’re gone. I just wanted to pop over and introduce myself to you, Marlowe. I didn’t get a chance to meet you the other day at the office,” she adds with a knowing sideways grin at Gunner. “I walked my ass all the way down the hall to discuss something with your man, but Veronica said he was, ahem, indisposed.”

Heat warms my cheeks.

Gunner chuckles. “Next time, call first.”

“Duly noted, boss.” Sedonia grins at me. “It’s lovely to meet you. Gunner had the worst taste in women back in college, second only to his slutty brother.”

Maverick takes offense. “Hey—”

She shushes him with a finger to his lips without looking away from me. “Even though we just met, I can already tell you’re a delightful upgrade.”

“Well, um, thank you.” I can’t help blushing again. “Congratulations on being featured in *ForbesWomen*. I loved reading about your investment club for girls, and how you help women land leadership positions in their industries. And what you said about overcoming imposter syndrome was super inspiring. The whole article was.”

“Aww, thanks, baby doll.” She tweaks my nose, her eyes twinkling warmly. “Speaking of inspiring, Gunner tells me you’re a brilliant pianist.”

I laugh. “I wouldn’t say bril—”

“*Aht aht*. Don’t do that. Don’t diminish your talent. ‘Brilliant’ is the adjective he used, and since he’s the biggest music snob I know, I’ll take his word for it. Besides,” Sedonia adds, “I’ve seen the video of you playing and I happen to agree with him. I was out of town when he threw his random dinner party, so I’m really bummed that I missed your crowd-pleasing performance. I’d love to hear more sometime.”

I beam. “Sure. Anytime.”

“We’ll schedule a date. Seriously.” She motions to my attire—an orange Longhorns jersey dress paired with cowboy boots. “Love your outfit, by the way.”

“Love yours, too.”

Maverick chuckles. “Why don’t you two just kiss already?”

Sedonia gives him a disgusted look. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

He leers. “I would, actually. More than you can imagine.”

Gunner shakes his head at him. “Go hose down, bro.”

Everyone laughs.

Just before halftime ends, the president of the university shows up with his VIP entourage to say hello to Gunner and Maverick. I can’t help feeling a little dazzled in the presence of such luminaries. When Gunner draws me to his side and introduces me as his girlfriend, I’m so overjoyed at being

publicly claimed by him that I practically levitate off the ground.

When he steps away to take a call during the third quarter, Maverick bumps his shoulder against mine. “It’s nice to see you and Gunn doing the whole couple thing. You’re good for each other.”

I smile shyly. “I think so, too.”

He grins at me. “Dad says you two act like lovesick teenagers when you’re together,” he teases. “You blow kisses at each other over breakfast, play footsie under the table, cuddle in front of the fire while reading Shakespeare—”

“Not true!” I protest, blushing.

Maverick cocks an eyebrow. “You calling my old man a liar?”

“No, but he’s exaggerating. I mean, we’re not *that* nauseating.”

“So you *weren’t* reciting Shakespeare to each other?”

“It wasn’t Shakespeare!” I pause, biting my lip. “It was Keats.”

Maverick throws back his head with a shout of laughter.

Grinning, I fork my fingers through my hair, pushing it back from my face.

Maverick affectionately tweaks my nose. “Seriously though, Marlowe. I’ve never seen my brother so happy, not even when he made his first million. You’ve got him on cloud fucking nine.” His pale eyes twinkle at me. “I envy what you guys have. Almost makes me want my own special someone.”

His admission surprises me. “You do?”

“Nahhh.”

I laugh and shake my head at him. I can’t help wondering what would happen if he and my sister met. Would sparks fly between them? Would they be compatible? I wish for the umpteenth time that Ember lived here with me. Maybe someday.

“Did Gunner ever tell you about the time we got into a barroom brawl?” Maverick asks.

“A barroom brawl? Oh, I have to hear this story,” I say with an eager grin.

“We were seventeen,” he begins, humor threading his deep voice. “It was Dad’s turn to keep us that weekend, so he picked us up from school. He used to love taking us places that Mom didn’t approve of. For our sixteenth birthday, for example, he took us to a strip club and treated us to private lap dances.”

I cringe. “Yikes.”

“Not exactly Father of the Year material, I’ll admit.” Maverick chuckles, rubbing his shadowed jaw. “Anyway, on this particular day, he took us to the shooting range, which we always enjoyed. On the way home afterward, we stopped at a bar. It was a seedy hole in the wall, but Dad swore they had the best hot wings in town. There was a group of rowdy rednecks sitting near our table. While we were eating, they kept eyeballing me and Gunner. We were still wearing our prep school uniforms, and we could hear them calling us ‘rich pretty boys’ and ‘chickenshit pansies.’ We ignored them, but when they started getting handsy with our waitress, Dad told ’em to leave her alone. The greasy scumbags didn’t take kindly to him intervening, so they got up and surrounded our table.” He snorts. “Big fucking mistake.”

My eyes are wide as saucers. “What happened?”

“We kicked their asses, that’s what happened.” Maverick grins broadly. “One minute they were running their mouths, the next minute fists were flying and boots were stomping. Gunner broke a chair over one guy’s head and laid him out cold. I busted another guy’s nose and knocked out a few teeth. Dad smashed a bottle over the ringleader’s head and tossed him and another asshole over the bar counter. It was glorious,” Maverick recalls with a hoot of laughter.

“Holy crap.” I’m grinning hard. “Don’t mess with the Ransom boys, huh?”

“Damn right. See, they didn’t know that Dad was a fellow redneck who grew up brawling in bars and taught his sons how to fight. They fucked around and found out.” Maverick leans back in his chair with a contented sigh. “Good times.”

I’m still laughing when Gunner returns to his seat beside me. Glowering at his brother, he wraps an arm around my shoulders in an unmistakably possessive gesture.

Laughing that wicked laugh, Maverick unfolds his long body from his chair and saunters off to the bar.

“What were you two talking about?” Gunner asks, sounding suspicious.

I pretend to look guilty. “Oops. Busted.”

His eyes narrow. “Meaning?”

I lean close to him as if confiding a deep secret. “I wasn’t going to tell you, but Maverick and I have been plotting to run away together—”

Gunner scowls. “Not funny.”

I laugh softly, nibbling his faint chin dimple. “Don’t be jealous. You know you’re the only man I want.”

His mouth curves. “If my brother had gotten to the bar before me that night, you would’ve met him instead of me.”

“But he didn’t.” I lift my eyes to his. “It was always meant to be you, Gunner. Only you.”

He leans in and kisses me, ignoring the catcalls and whistles from his brother and friends.

Chapter Thirty-Four



MARLOWE

“YOU AND GUNNER ARE COUPLE GOALS,” Quinn says to me two days later when we meet for lunch at our favorite café. “Seriously, Mar. Love looks good on you.”

I smile. I can’t seem to stop smiling these days. Being in love has turned me into a total sap. I’m even composing a song for Gunner. Yeah, I’ve got it bad.

Quinn bites into her veggie pita. “So now that you’re officially a couple, how much longer are you gonna work for him?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I haven’t thought that far ahead. Right now I’m just focused on saving money and finishing school.”

“I hear you. But doesn’t it feel a little weird being your boyfriend’s housekeeper?”

“You would think so, but it doesn’t. Not really.” I smile softly. “To be honest, I enjoy taking care of his home. It feels almost ... natural.”

“Wow,” Quinn marvels, staring at me with both wonder and amusement. “You *are* in love.”

I laugh and take a sip of my latte.

She motions to my pinstriped blouse and fitted charcoal skirt. “Why are you all dressed up anyway?”

“I have to give a presentation in class.”

“Oh, cool. Nervous?”

“Not really. Gunner let me practice on him, and he gave me some great pointers.”

“Ah, the perks of dating a brilliant scholar slash CEO.”

“Yup.” I grin.

“Is his dad still staying with you guys?”

“No, he went back to Aspen Oaks yesterday. Gunner made him promise to attend his counseling sessions and group therapy. The employees he bribed were reprimanded and given another chance, but only because Gunner didn’t want them to lose their jobs over his father’s actions.”

“That was kind of him,” Quinn replies, polishing off her pita and hummus. “Do you think his dad will stay out of trouble?”

“I sure hope so,” I say ruefully. “Mrs. Calder threatened that she would never speak to him again if he breaks his promise to Gunner. If *that* doesn’t motivate him to stay sober, I don’t know what will.”

Quinn sighs. “Fingers crossed.”

“Toes, too.” I sip my latte and smile at her over the rim of my cup. “So what’s new with you? Still no sightings of your stoner neighbor?”

“Actually,” she says, drawing out the word, “I saw Eric last night.”

“Really? So he didn’t get busted by the DEA like you suspected?”

“Nope.” She laughs. “He just got back from touring with his band. He’s in a *band*, Marlowe. Like a real musician. Can you believe it?”

“Wow. That’s awesome.” The excited gleam in her eyes makes me grin. “You had sex with him again, didn’t you?”

“I did,” she admits with a very satisfied smile. “It was even better than the first time. And the first time was pretty freaking spectacular.”

“Well, damn,” I exclaim.

She grins lewdly. “He may not be the greatest guitar player, but he definitely knows how to hit my G-spot and deliver some killer Os.”

We burst into naughty giggles, attracting the curiosity of several diners.

As our hilarity subsides, Quinn finishes her latte and licks foam off her lips. “Well, I’d better get back to work. I’m sneaking out early ’cause Eric has a gig tonight and wants me to come watch him play.”

“Aww. That’s so sweet.” I grin. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“He’s all right.” Quinn’s affected nonchalance doesn’t fool me. “I’m only sticking around because he promised to buy a new couch.”

“Oh, thank God. The idea of you guys screwing on that nasty ass couch is just ...” I trail off with a shudder of disgust.

Quinn laughs and pulls out her debit card.

“Put your money away. Lunch is on me.”

“Well, look at you, big spender,” she teases, brown eyes twinkling. “Normally I would protest, but since I don’t get paid till Friday—and you make way more than me *and* have a billionaire boyfriend—I’m totally okay with you buying lunch. In fact, let’s just make it a permanent thing.”

I laugh and playfully kick her shin under the table before she stands up. “Have fun tonight. I’ll want all the deets tomorrow.”

“But of course.” She grins and leans down to hug me, then walks off with a little wave of her fingers.

After she leaves, I order another latte and drink it while reviewing my presentation notes. I can’t help smiling at the changes Gunner suggested, expanding some of my ideas and fine-tuning my words. He’s my secret weapon, and I couldn’t be more grateful.

After settling the bill, I'm rummaging in my purse for my car keys when I hear a familiar voice say, "Marlowe?"

I look up to see Harlan Pierce walking toward me. Hot anger flares in my chest.

"I thought I recognized you." He's all smiles and charm. "Good to see you again. How've you been?"

I give him an icy look. "Mr. Pierce."

"I've been meaning to track you down to further discuss my company's internship program." He gestures to the empty chair across from me. "Mind if I join you?"

"Actually, I was just leaving."

"Ah." Nodding wisely, he takes a seat anyway. "Judging by your frosty demeanor, Gunner must have filled you in on our contentious history."

"He did. Which is why I have no interest in anything you have to say. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"He's not who you think he is."

I freeze, halfway out of my seat. Scanning Harlan's face, I say sharply, "What the hell are you talking about?"

He motions for me to sit back down.

After a moment, I reluctantly comply.

He calmly leans back in his seat. "You have every reason to be suspicious of me. I hate your boyfriend's guts, I won't deny it. I'd love nothing more than to grind him to dust and scatter him to the four winds. But this isn't about me settling an old grudge. Believe it or not, Marlowe, I'm trying to look out for you."

"Sure you are." My caustic tone masks the dread bubbling up like acid in my stomach.

"You're young and inexperienced, and certain men will take advantage—"

"Spare me the 'father knows best' lecture and get to the point," I snap.

He leans forward, his gaze intent on my face. “If you’re going to be in a relationship with Gunner Ransom, you need to learn as much as you can about him. There are things you don’t know.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that he’s keeping secrets from you.”

My skin goes cold and clammy. “What secrets?”

Harlan eyes me for a moment. “Are you familiar with Elliott Champion?”

“The CEO of Champion Records? Yes, I’ve heard of him.” I don’t add that I applied for a job as Elliott Champion’s executive assistant shortly after I started working for Gunner. When I came across the job opening at Champion Records, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to submit my resume. At the time I was mad at Gunner and looking for an escape. But I also recognized that working in the executive suite of a major record label could do wonders for my career.

“Elliott Champion and I belong to the same gym,” Harlan continues. “When we recently ran into each other in the sauna, he mentioned that he was hiring an executive assistant and asked if I knew any good candidates. Without thinking twice, I told him about you and your music background. Turns out he already knew who you were. He’d seen the viral video of you playing the piano at Gunner’s dinner party, so he recognized your name when your resume came across his desk. He appreciated your musical talent, and he thought you’d be a good fit for his company.”

The dread deepens in my stomach as Harlan continues talking. “Elliott has a longstanding business relationship with Gunner. He didn’t want him to think he was poaching one of his employees, so as a professional courtesy, he told him that you’d applied for his assistant job. Gunner wasn’t pleased. He outright discouraged Elliott from interviewing you. He even went so far as to recommend a more qualified candidate.”

A horrible tightness wraps around my chest, pressing into my lungs. “You’re lying,” I whisper.

“For your sake, I wish I was.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

I sit frozen, my mind reeling. Though every instinct is screaming that Gunner would never deliberately sabotage me, the fact is that I *did* apply for a job at Champion Records. Harlan would have no way of knowing that unless he was telling the truth. But I don’t want to believe it. I *can’t* believe it.

Harlan gives me a pitying look. “Call Elliott yourself. He’ll tell you all about their conversation.”

I stare at him, nostrils flaring.

He smiles a predatory smile, abandoning the pretense that he’s not enjoying this. “If you ever find yourself back in the job market—”

“You’re the last person I’d call,” I hiss, then grab my handbag and storm out of the café.

DESPITE ALL THE CHAOS RAGING IN my head, I manage to deliver my presentation with aplomb, earning praise from my professor and peers. When class is over, I make a beeline for the parking garage.

Hopping into the Range Rover, I pull out my phone and see a text from Gunner saying he’s working late and not to wait up.

Gnashing my teeth in frustration, I toss the phone down and drum my fingers on the steering wheel. I need to talk to him and get some answers, and I can’t wait another minute. So I fire up the engine and head straight to his office.

Though it’s after hours when I arrive, the security guard escorts me to the elevator without asking questions. He has a standing order to let me into the building, day or night.

I get off on the top floor, march past the empty reception desk and key open the doors leading to the executive suites. Having unfettered access to a global corporation’s inner

sanctum is pretty mind-boggling, but I'm too upset right now to feel awed or privileged.

The door to the CFO's office is cracked open an inch—just enough for me to hear fragments of conversation. Sedonia is talking on the phone, her voice sharp and flat with fury as she warns, “Fucking try me. I dare you.”

Sounds like I'm not the only one who's having a bad day.

As I near the end of the long corridor, Maverick comes striding out from the direction of his office. He's trailed by his petite assistant, her short legs struggling to keep pace with his aggressive stride. He's in full boss mode, snapping out orders and expecting swift results.

He smiles briefly when he sees me approaching. But his smile is more grimace than grin, and I can see the agitation in his icy eyes.

Is Gunner available? I mouth to him.

He nods once and squeezes my arm before continuing down the hall with his harried assistant.

Taking a deep breath, I turn left to enter the anteroom of Gunner's office. Veronica isn't at her desk, but I can tell by the open file folders and half-finished coffee that she hasn't left for the day. A stock ticker rolls across her massive computer screen, displaying real-time price quotes for different global markets.

I walk toward the double doors leading to Gunner's office and peer inside. He's standing by the windows that span the length of the room. He's on the phone, speaking in Mandarin. His voice is low and strained, vibrating with fury.

I hesitate in the doorway, wondering if it's safe to go in. Without actually knowing what he's saying, it's clear that he's in the middle of something serious. It might not be the best time to pick a fight with him.

Gnawing my lower lip, I let my eyes run over his body. He's removed his suit jacket and tie. The first three buttons of his shirt are undone, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows.

Framed against the city's nightscape, he looks intimidatingly tall, powerful and commanding.

Suddenly he glances over and sees me standing just inside the doors. His face softens ever so slightly before he turns away to resume snarling into the phone.

I swallow nervously. I definitely have the worst timing in the world.

After a few more minutes, Gunner ends the call and shoves his phone deep into his pocket.

I swallow again, a little intimidated by the anger I can feel rolling off him in seismic waves. "Are you—"

He slams a fist against the window. "*God fucking dammit!*"

My knees actually wobble at his violent outburst.

"Who ... who was on the phone?" I ask, my voice barely a squeak.

"One of our business partners in Beijing." Jaw clenched tight, Gunner stalks over to the bar, pours two fingers of whiskey and knocks it back in one swallow.

"Is everything okay?" I cringe at my own question. Clearly everything is *not* okay.

"I made a mistake, a stupid miscalculation, and now I'm dealing with the fallout," he mutters darkly without looking at me.

"I'm sorry," I say softly.

He doesn't acknowledge my words. He just pours himself another drink and gulps it down.

I take a hesitant step forward. "Is there anything I can do?"

His mouth twists sardonically. "Unless you can wire my company the four hundred mil we just lost, then no, there's nothing you can do."

The breath whooshes out of my lungs. "Four hundred *million?*"

He gives a harsh snort. “Yeah.”

“Oh, my God,” I whisper, staring at him in horror. “I am so sorry, Gunner.”

“Not half as sorry as I am, believe me.”

I want to go to him, take him in my arms and comfort him. But he seems beyond consoling, and in that moment, I can't help wondering if he blames me. He's been spending so much time with me this past month. Would he have made such a colossal error if he'd been more focused on work? Have I become a costly distraction to him?

I watch as he splashes more whiskey into the crystal tumbler and carries it over to the windows. He leans back against the glass with his arms at his sides, his drink dangling from his fingertips as his eyes travel over my body with slow deliberation.

“You look nice,” he finally murmurs.

“Thank you.”

He taps his finger against the cut rim of his glass. “You should've worn the red shoes I bought you. That would've been a better choice.”

His remark stings more than any of my mother's criticisms. “I'm sorry you don't approve of my fashion choices,” I say tightly. “I'll try harder next time.”

He grimaces. “Fuck, I'm sorry. That was a dickish thing to say.”

“It was,” I coolly agree. “But you're under a lot of stress right now, so I'll give you a pass.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, and swears under his breath. “I fucking hate losing money.”

In a flash of insight, I see his father in his own cushy executive suite, reeling from a catastrophic financial loss. He'd started drinking after that. Then came the gambling. Was that the future Gunner feared when he looked at his dad? Did he believe, like his mother, that he possessed the same self-destructive impulses?

I watch uneasily as he raises his drink to his mouth. He pauses to stare into the amber liquid, his fingers clenching and unclenching around the glass. He looks like he wants to crush it in his hand, or hurl it across the room.

I nervously shift from one foot to the other. “Maybe I should—”

“Shit.” His eyes flick to my face as if he just remembered my presence. “How’d your speech go?”

“It went well. Everyone was impressed.”

“Good, good.”

“I can tell you about it later.”

He nods distractedly, his mind half a world away.

I start backing toward the door. “I’ve obviously caught you at a bad time—”

“It’s okay.” He drains the whiskey and plunks the glass down on the bar, then holds out his hand to me. “Come here.”

“I’m fine right where I am.”

He frowns. “Mar—”

“I should go. Really. You’re in crisis mode and you need to focus on—”

“Dammit.” He closes the distance between us in three powerful strides and wraps me up in his arms, holding me tight against his chest. Even at the end of a long day, he still smells good. As if I needed another reason to want to punch him.

He drops a kiss on the crown of my head and buries his face in my hair. “I’m sorry for being such an ass. This day has been one big clusterfuck, but I’m happy to see you.”

I can’t resist snuggling into him, pressing my cheek against his chest and listening to his strong heartbeat. He has the power to hurt me like no one else, which makes my love for him so dangerous.

He gently strokes my back before settling his arms around my waist. “I’m speaking at a tech conference in Munich next week,” he murmurs, nuzzling the side of my neck. “Why don’t you play hooky and come with me?”

“I don’t know, Gunner. Are you sure I’m qualified enough?” The bitter words are out before I can stop them.

His whole body tenses against me, and for several seconds he doesn’t speak. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, forget it.”

He pulls away and tilts my chin up with firm fingers, forcing me to meet his demanding gaze. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to get into it right now. You’ve got enough—”

“Just fucking say it.”

My anger returns in a flash. “Why did you tell Elliott Champion not to hire me?”

He looks genuinely surprised by my question. “Who told you that?”

“I ran into Harlan today—”

His eyes narrow with fury.

I plunge ahead, undaunted. “He told me that you talked Elliott Champion out of interviewing me. Not only that, you referred him to someone else. Why would you do that, Gunner? I have experience as an executive assistant plus a strong music background. Why wasn’t that good enough for you?”

His voice is dangerously low as he replies, “I thought I told you to stay away from that son of a bitch.”

“This isn’t about Harlan!” I exclaim furiously. “It’s about us, and the fact that you went behind my back and screwed me out of a good job opportunity!”

His jaw tightens. “It wasn’t like that.”

“No? I called Elliott myself and he confirmed that he was interested in hiring me. But after talking to you, he went with a different candidate. A more qualified candidate, per *your* recommendation.” I wait for him to deny it, to tell me that I’m crazy to even think he could do such a thing.

He fixes me with a level stare. “It’s true. I did steer him away from you.”

I step back, gaping at him in wounded disbelief. “Why would you sabotage me like that?”

“I didn’t sabotage you. I did it to protect you.”

“Protect me from what?”

He clenches his jaw. “What Harlan conveniently left out is that Elliott Campion is a notorious sexual predator who goes through assistants like most people change socks. It’s an open secret in the industry that he can’t keep his fucking hands to himself. If you went to work for him, he would’ve been all over you. No way in hell was I letting that happen,” Gunner growls with a feral glint in his eye. “So yeah, I told him not to call you. At no point did I dispute your skills or qualifications, but I did recommend another candidate. A *male* candidate he’d have no interest in banging.”

His explanation defuses my anger, but only a little. “Why didn’t you tell me all this before?”

“Why the fuck would I? You didn’t need to know.”

“Seriously, Gunner? This is *my* life we’re talking about. *My* career. *My* future. You can’t just go around chasing off prospective employers!”

“So you *want* to work for a lecherous sleazebag?” he challenges in disbelief. “You *want* to be sexually harassed?”

“Of course not!”

“Then what’s the fucking problem?”

I shake my head at him. “I can’t believe you don’t get it. You kept me in the dark about an important matter pertaining to me. You could have simply warned me about Elliott and

then let me decide for myself whether I still wanted the job. I wouldn't have, to be clear. But it wasn't your call to make."

He scowls and rakes a hand through his hair, tousling the midnight strands.

"You can't keep me to yourself forever, you know," I say starkly. "Sooner or later you're going to run out of ways to eliminate your competition."

His gaze slashes to me. "What are you implying? You think I had an ulterior motive?"

"Maybe you did. Maybe you didn't appreciate Elliott trying to steal your housekeeper. Or maybe you were mad at me for seeking another job."

The tiny flicker of his lashes betrays him. "Even if that were true—"

"I knew it! You *were* mad at me!"

"Maybe I was," he growls in frustration. "I thought we had an understanding. I thought we were settling into a good routine and getting along—"

"We were until *you* pulled a power trip and threw a dinner party just to sabotage my date with Dawson." I arch an accusing eyebrow at him. "Starting to see a pattern here?"

He blinks, uncharacteristically caught off guard. I see a flicker of guilt in his eyes before he glances away, a muscle leaping in his jaw.

"I wasn't thrilled when I found out you were still job hunting," he grumbles. "But my reaction doesn't change a damn thing about what I told you. Elliott Campion is a fucking predator and everyone knows it. *Including* Harlan."

I fold my arms under my breasts. "Thank you for protecting my virtue, Gunner. I'm sure your heart was in the right place. I just wish you'd talked to me first instead of behaving like a possessive control freak."

His gaze hardens, chips of blue steel. "Is that what you think I am?"

“What I think, Gunner, is that if you’re going to be making decisions for me without my knowledge, maybe I should find someplace else to work!”

Dead silence follows my exasperated outburst.

For a long moment he pins me with a bottomless stare.

“Someplace else to work?” His voice is menacingly restrained, scattering goose bumps over my skin. “You want to leave, Marlowe?”

Looking into his eyes, I realize what he’s really asking isn’t whether I intend to leave his employment, but rather his life.

Turning away from him, I walk across the room to the windows. My legs are shaking and my breath is becoming harder to push through my lungs.

He comes up silently behind me. I can see our reflections in the glass, see the burning intensity in his gaze.

“I asked you a question.” His voice is low, every syllable succinct.

I take in a leveling breath and slowly exhale. “Gunner—”

He turns me to face him. I can feel the throbbing pulse of his anger battering away at my defenses, eroding them like a turbulent storm pounding a shoreline.

My lips part instinctively when he leans in, his face hovering mere inches above mine. The air around us is so charged, I feel the sizzle in my bones.

Flattening his hands on the window, he cages me in, his shirt straining at his big shoulders. The heat of his body pushes me into the glass, so potent I can feel it burning through my clothes and seeping into my skin.

I stare up at him, resentment and longing inextricably twined. “Gunner—”

He leans closer, bringing his mouth to my ear and whispering softly, “You wanna leave me, kitten?”

My heart is hammering, a painful staccato beneath my breastbone. I've completely lost the ability to speak.

"Do you?" He drags his nose along the sensitive skin behind my ear, scraping me with his teeth like an alpha wolf marking his mate.

A shudder of pure need whips through me, my nipples pebbling beneath my bra. I let my head thud against the window with my palms pressed flat against the glass.

As his lips trail slowly up my neck and along my jaw, I gasp at the raw desire pumping through my body and pooling in the pit of my stomach.

Watching me with hooded eyes, he slides his hand under my skirt and up my thigh.

I bite back a moan, quivering almost violently as he cups my pussy through the silk of my panties. When he runs his middle finger along the damp crotch, it's all I can do not to roll my hips in a shameless plea for more.

"Answer me." His finger traces the seam of my pussy lips, coaxing another flood of warmth from my body. He smiles darkly, feeling the evidence of my arousal.

"Would you miss this?" he whispers tauntingly against my mouth. "If you left, would you miss me touching you like this?"

I swallow the whimper that wants to escape my throat.

With his thumb, he rubs my silk panties across my clit, the dewy fabric creating a delicious, tormenting friction.

"Yes," he purrs silkily, his breath warm against my face. "I think you would, kitten. I think you'd miss this very much."

I can barely hear his voice over the wild pounding of my heart. It's frightening how well he knows my body. How he knows just where and how to touch me to make me weak, to make me burn.

Determined to completely unravel me, he pushes my panties to the side and brushes his knuckle against the aching folds of my pussy.

I moan at the sharp spike of pleasure.

“If you really want to leave, I won’t stop you.” His voice is rougher now, darker. “But you don’t want to, do you?”

“No,” I gasp, and rock up against him. “I’m not leaving you.”

Slowly he tilts his head back to look at me from under his thick lashes.

I want him to finish what he started. I want him to make me come, to ease some of the hurt and confusion I’m feeling.

But he doesn’t give me the release I need. Instead he removes his hand from between my legs, pulls down my skirt and calmly smooths it back into place. Then he steps away, leaving me shamefully bereft.

“Go home, Marlowe,” he commands in a low tone.

My face burns and my eyes are smarting.

“Home,” he reiterates, giving me a look of heated warning. “Don’t run and hide at Quinn’s. Go home and wait for me.”

With that, he turns his back on me and walks over to his desk, shifting his attention to more pressing matters.

Lost for words, I leave his office feeling humiliated and subdued. On the drive home, I blast Lesley Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me” on repeat.

When I get to the house, I head straight to my closet and pull out the gorgeous red Jimmy Choo pumps that Gunner referenced earlier. I snap a picture of them and text it to Quinn:
Want these?

I don’t expect to hear back from her anytime soon since she’s attending Eric’s show tonight.

But she responds within seconds: **Is this a joke?**

No, I text back.

Aren’t those a gift from Mr. Moneybags? And you’ve only worn them once, right?

Yes, I type. **Since you wear the same size—**

I'm interrupted by her next message: **Why are you getting rid of \$4k shoes???**

Just want to free up some closet space, I lie.

She's rightfully skeptical: **The closet that's bigger than our whole apartment???** **THAT closet?!**

I sigh heavily before replying: **Do you want the shoes or not?**

Her answer is unequivocal: **HELL YESSS!!!**

Lol. I'll drop them off tomorrow.

Thank you, fairy godmother! she replies with an avalanche of heart emojis.

Chuckling, I drop my phone on the bench and gaze broodingly at the designer heels I've just given away. The small act of rebellion probably won't matter much in the long run, but it brings me a smidgeon of perverse comfort, and right now, I'll take all the comfort I can get.

Chapter Thirty-Five



MARLOWE

I DON'T SEE MUCH OF GUNNER over the next several days.

He leaves early in the morning and comes home very late. I know he's under a lot of pressure at work, but I can't shake the feeling that he's also avoiding me.

When he crawls into bed at night, he doesn't pull me into his arms like he used to. He doesn't spoon me, nestling his face in my hair and protectively curling his arm around my waist. He stays on his side of the bed, leaving an ocean of space between us. I can practically hear his mind churning in the darkness before he eventually falls asleep.

During the few waking times we're together, an uneasy tension hangs between us. He's quiet, distant. When he speaks, his voice is measured. When he smiles, he smiles with his mouth but not his eyes.

Laurene's warning keeps playing on a cruel loop in my head. *When he gets bored with you—and he will—he's going to send you packing.*

Was she right after all? Has Gunner already grown bored with me? Or has he simply decided I'm not worth the trouble anymore?

I don't have any answers. The only thing I'm certain of is that something has broken between us, and I don't know how to put the jagged pieces back together again.

On Friday night, I sleep in my own room for the first time in weeks. The large bed feels foreign and empty after so many nights spent in Gunner's bed. It takes me a while to get reacclimated.

After tossing and turning for hours, I've just drifted off to sleep when the mattress dips behind me.

I feel his heat as he slides under the covers. Then he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me back until I'm firmly tucked against his front and my head is cradled on his other arm.

It feels like heaven, so exquisitely wonderful that I have to swallow back a grateful sob.

Gently he begins stroking my hair. His touch is a salve to my soul after four days of painful alienation.

He doesn't speak, and neither do I. We just lay there in the dark, listening to each other breathe. Eventually his hand drifts from my hair to rest over my hip, a warmly comforting weight.

Staring out the window at the half moon, I whisper softly, "Promise me we're going to be okay."

He doesn't answer.

I tell myself it's because he's fallen asleep.

But somehow I know better.

ON SUNDAY EVENING WE ATTEND AN art opening at a major gallery in the Hyde Park Historic District. The featured artist is the daughter of one of Pantheon's early investors.

When Gunner introduces us to each other, I can't help feeling a prickle of envy. Gianna is absolutely stunning with aqua blue eyes, sculpted cheekbones and sleekly bobbed black hair. Her skin is golden from a summer spent in Italy and her makeup is flawless. She's wearing a clingy yellow chiffon dress with knee-high stiletto boots. Tall, lithe, with legs that go on for days, she looks more like a supermodel than a burgeoning artist.

“Nice to meet you, Gianna,” I say as we shake hands. “Congratulations on your exhibit.”

“Isn’t it amazing?” she gushes breathlessly. “I’m so stoked.”

“You should be. It’s your big night.” Gunner takes in the guests milling around eating canapés and appraising the art on the walls. “Good turnout.”

“Thanks to *you*,” Gianna practically squeals. “Even my publicist admitted that most of these people wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t invited them. No wonder Daddy’s always singing your praises.”

Gunner smiles. “Is he here yet?”

“He’s on his way.” She leans close to Gunner and whispers excitedly, “Sebastian Locke is here. I couldn’t believe my eyes when he walked through the door. I mean, he only happens to be one of the most famous art critics in the country. What’s he doing at *my* little exhibit?”

Gunner looks indulgently amused. “Have you met him?”

“Yes, but I was so nervous I probably didn’t make the best impression.” She links her arm through Gunner’s and simpers up at him, lashes batting like butterfly wings. “Can you reintroduce us? Help convince him I’m the next Georgia O’Keeffe and *not* a tongue-tied airhead?”

Gunner chuckles. “I’ll do my best.” He winks at me and I smile back.

Gianna clings to him as he takes her around the room, introducing her to the prominent art critics and collectors in attendance. He’s a patron of the arts with the power and prestige to make or break careers. Watching everyone suck up to him is both amusing and fascinating.

I’m considerably less entertained by the look of adoration on Gianna’s face. It’s her big night, and I certainly don’t begrudge her her moment in the spotlight. But every time she laughs and lays her head against Gunner’s shoulder, I shrivel up inside. Things are still shaky between him and me, so I’m feeling especially vulnerable tonight.

When I've had enough of trailing behind them like a third wheel, I swipe a flute of champagne from a passing server and wander off on my own.

I end up chatting with a fashionable silver-haired woman with a posh English accent. While drinking champagne and nibbling caviar canapés, we discuss the art world and debate surrealism versus expressionism. It's a riveting conversation, and she's visibly impressed with my ability to hold my own. I attribute my knowledge to my father, who fostered my love of the arts by taking me to museums and art shows from the time I could walk.

"I like you, Marlowe Somerset," the woman declares with a twinkle in her eye. "You're a credit to Mr. Ransom. A delightful asset. I certainly hope he realizes that."

Before I can respond, we're interrupted by an older gentleman soliciting the woman's input on a painting. Before she departs with him, she hands me her business card, which identifies her as Lilith Halifax, Founder and Executive Director of Halifax Music Society.

"Please call if there's ever anything I can do for you," she says with a wink and genuine affection in her voice. "Perhaps we can grab lunch sometime and continue our fascinating tête-à-tête."

"I'd like that," I say, smiling warmly.

As I tuck her card into my teensy clutch, a sugary peal of laughter draws my attention to a large crowd gathered around Gianna and Gunner. She's holding court, laughing and gesturing with her hands, happy to have a captive audience. When she looks to Gunner for some type of affirmation, he rewards her with an approving smile.

A twinge of jealousy clogs my throat. It's pretty obvious, and not at all surprising, that Gianna is infatuated with Gunner. But is he attracted to her? Would he sleep with her if the opportunity arose?

He has a ravenous appetite that craves variety, Laurene's taunt scrapes across my brain like barbed wire.

I feel physically sick at the thought of Gunner being with Gianna during one of the late nights he's supposed to be working. Would he betray me like that? Could he?

Chugging down an anxious mouthful of champagne, I roam around the corner and stop to study a huge abstract titled *Feeding the Soul*. It has fields of orange, yellow and blue overlaid with random circles and squares. Gianna says the painting was inspired by messy dining tables at a trattoria she frequented this summer. That might explain why it looks like blobs of cheap food coloring haphazardly hurled at a blank canvas.

The unkind thought brings a stab of guilt, and for a moment I question whether I'm judging Gianna's painting too harshly because she's after my boyfriend. But no, that's not it. The truth is I'm just not a fan of her work, and that's perfectly okay. With a roomful of admirers, she certainly doesn't need my support.

Just as I'm about to move on, firm arms wrap around me from behind.

My heart jolts with surprise before a smile overtakes my face. I gladly melt into Gunner's embrace, his warmth seeping into my body like a welcome summer breeze, soaking every part of me.

He pushes aside the heavy curtain of my hair and rests his cheek over my ear, and together we stare at the painting in front of us.

"She's talented," I feel obligated to say.

There's a long beat of silence.

"The potential is ... there."

I look over my shoulder at Gunner, surprised by his tepid endorsement.

"Her father has been a loyal investor for years," he explains, lips faintly twitching. "Considering the fortune he spent on her art school education, he has a vested interest in promoting her artistic endeavors."

“Ah,” I say delicately, reading between the lines. He’s helping Gianna as a personal favor to her father, not out of some overwhelming belief in her untapped talent. The relief I feel is admittedly pathetic.

Nuzzling my nape, he slides his hand down the front of my body, broad fingers splaying across my stomach. My pussy quivers at the feel of him, thick and hard against my lower back. It’s been a week since we made love. The longest, most excruciating week of my life.

“You didn’t eat much of your dinner.” His breath dances along my neck as he speaks close to my ear. “Are you sure you didn’t hate the restaurant?”

“Of course I didn’t hate it.” The exclusive restaurant with Hill Country views was one of the finest restaurants I’d ever been inside. “It was perfect, Gunner, and so was the meal. I just wasn’t very hungry.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

I nod, touched by his concern. “Just feeling a little bloated. It’s almost that time of the month.”

His big hand flexes against my belly, gently pulling me closer as he rumbles against my skin, “I’ve missed making love to you.”

Heat pours through me, and a heavy ache settles between my thighs. “I haven’t gone anywhere,” I murmur pointedly.

“I know. I’m the one who’s been missing in action.” Remorse threads his voice, and he exhales a deep breath. “I owe you an apology for the way I’ve been acting.”

I swallow hard, not saying anything. Just listening.

“I don’t ... I hope you’re not thinking of leaving.” His voice is layered with uncertainty, a rare vulnerability that tugs at my heart.

“Is that what you’re worried about? Me leaving?”

He doesn’t answer.

When I try to turn around, his hand tightens against my midsection, keeping me in front of him with my back turned. As if he doesn't want me to see his face.

My heart beats faster. "Gunner—"

"I don't want to mess this up," he whispers a little raggedly. "Do you think we can—"

"Sorry to intrude." It's Gianna, and she sounds anything but sorry.

Biting back a frustrated sigh, I turn to watch as she latches onto Gunner's arm with both of hers.

"Daddy just arrived. Will you come say hello and reassure him that I haven't done anything to embarrass the family name?"

"Of course." Gunner bends his head to kiss my bare shoulder and then my cheek, whispering in my ear, "I won't be long."

I nod and force a smile. Watching them walk off together, I'm struck by what a stunning pair they make, with their striking blue eyes and raven hair. It's a punch in the gut, compounding my misery.

"More champagne?"

I turn to see a pretty server standing there with a tray of champagne flutes. I smile feebly and hold up my half-full glass. "Thanks, but I'm still nursing this one."

Instead of moving on, she slowly looks me over, taking in my one-shoulder pink jumpsuit and crystal-encrusted heels.

There's no mistaking the envy in her eyes as she drawls mockingly, "From humble housekeeper to glammed-up girlfriend. Well played, Cinderella."

I frown at her. "Do I know you?"

"No, but I'm sure you've heard of me. My name's Brynn. I used to work for Gunner."

"Oh?" I give her a closer look. She's in her late twenties with sultry dark eyes and two long brown braids draped over

large breasts. She's wearing a white shirt, an apron over black dress pants, and black flats.

"So how are things going at Casa Ransom?" she asks.

"They're going well," I say evenly.

"Are you sure? Because from the look of things ..." She deliberately lets her voice trail off.

I follow her gaze to see Gunner and Gianna laughing with their heads bent together, their glossy black hair blending perfectly. Jealousy tightens like a knot in my chest until it's hard for me to breathe.

"Are you sure you don't want more champagne?" Brynn asks with venomous sweetness. "You look like you could use it."

"Nope." I toss back the rest of my drink, plunk the glass down on her tray and smirk at her. "Nice chatting with you. I'll give your regards to Gunner."

As I start to walk away, she calls after me, "You're not the first housekeeper he's fucked."

Her words stop me dead in my tracks.

"Did you think you were special?" she taunts scornfully. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but you're not."

I whirl around to stare at her. "You're lying."

"Am I?" Her lips spread slowly in a vicious smile. "I can still feel his big cock in my mouth, and I'll never forget how good his cum tastes."

I suck in a breath, my heart plummeting right along with my stomach.

A flash of satisfaction lights her eyes.

I look across the room at Gunner, who's now talking to Gianna's father. Catching my gaze, he frowns and glances at Brynn. His eyes narrow as recognition darkens his face.

Brynn lets out a low, nasty chuckle. "That's the look of a man who knows he's busted."

With a calm I'm nowhere near feeling, I say to her, "You and Gunner are both adults. Why should I care what did or didn't happen between you before I met him?"

"You shouldn't." She pauses for maximum effect. "Unless he told you that you're the first employee he's ever crossed the line with."

My head is reeling and my heart is splintering. But I refuse to give her the satisfaction of seeing me crumble, so I look her in the eye and say coolly, "I'm sorry your job performance wasn't up to Gunner's standards. Hopefully you'll have better luck with this gig, though I gotta tell you, your hospitality skills suck. You might want to work on that."

Her lips thin.

Before she can spew another word, I turn and walk away from her.

Gunner is striding purposefully toward me. There's a stony, furious glint in his eyes and his mouth is set in a hard line.

I don't want to get in a fight or cause a scene. I just want to leave.

"What's wrong?" he growls when he reaches me.

"I don't feel well," I mumble. "I'm leaving, but you can stay. I'll call an Uber—"

"Like hell you will." He cups my elbow and steers me through the crowd toward the exit.

We don't exchange another word until we're settled in the backseat of the car with the privacy glass raised.

"What did Brynn say to you?" Gunner demands.

"It doesn't matter," I whisper tightly.

"Clearly it does. You're white as a fucking ghost. Tell me what she said."

I just shake my head, staring blindly out the window. I'm remembering the time I asked him about his previous housekeeper. He got so angry and defensive that I felt guilty

for even bringing her up. He told me he'd never mixed business with pleasure before. He told me I was the first, and I believed him.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I'm such a damn idiot.

"I don't know what she said to upset you," Gunner grinds out, "but she's a manipulative liar—"

I whip my head around. "Was she lying about you fucking her?"

"YES!" he booms.

"You never had sex with her?"

"Hell no!"

"What about her giving you a blowjob?"

Something like guilt flashes in his eyes before they harden again. "It's not what you think."

"Oh, please! She had your dick in her mouth. It's *exactly* what I think."

"No, it's not," he snarls. "If you'd shut up and let me explain—"

"By all means," I say sarcastically. "Please explain to me how a blowjob *isn't* a blowjob."

He glares at me, his eyes so dark they appear black in the dim light of the backseat.

I return his glare, crossing my arms expectantly.

"Before you came into my life," he begins in a tight voice, "I was so consumed with work that I rarely spent any time at home. Mrs. Calder handled my household affairs, so I had very limited contact with Brynn. But I'm not dumb or blind. I know when a woman's trying to seduce me, so I noticed all the little things Brynn did to get my attention. Like shortening the hem of her uniform dress, loosening extra buttons to show off her cleavage, sashaying past my office in skimpy workout clothes. Hell, she even dyed her hair blond to look like my fiancée. I almost didn't recognize her tonight because she went back to her natural color," he growls in annoyance, shoving a

hand through his own hair before continuing, “She was sneaky and calculating. She knew how to walk close to the line without crossing it.” He pauses. “Until that night.”

My pulse is racing unnervingly fast. “What happened?”

He clenches his jaw. “Mrs. Calder came to me one day, told me she wasn’t pleased with Brynn’s work and was thinking about letting her go. Brynn apparently overheard us talking about her, because she decided it was time to make her move before she got fired. About a week later, I had a hellish day at work and then Laurene broke up with me, which only worsened my mood. Not because I loved her, but because I hate to fail at anything. I went to a bar that night and got hammered, then came home and passed out on the couch. Sometime later I woke up and found Brynn kneeling between my legs with her hand on my zipper. The room was dark, and in my dazed confusion, I thought she was Laurene until she spoke. I was half drunk and mad at the world, so in a stupid moment of weakness, I let her give me a blowjob.”

“You must’ve really enjoyed it,” I accuse, my stomach twisted with jealousy. “She says you came in her mouth.”

He scowls. “That doesn’t mean anything. It was nothing special and I regretted it immediately afterward, though I was more disgusted with myself than with her. When I fired her the next morning, she threatened to sue me for sexual harassment. I told her to go for it. She didn’t, unsurprisingly.” He grits his teeth, never tearing his gaze from mine. “I’m not proud of my behavior that night. If I could go back and change things, I would in a heartbeat. But I can’t, and you’re just going to have to accept that.”

I bite hard on my bottom lip, white-knuckled fingers gripping the tiny clutch in my lap.

He stares at me, his expression grim and frustrated. “Mar—”

“You told me you never fool around with your employees. But that wasn’t completely true, Gunner. Brynn is a piece of shit for taking advantage of you while you were drunk. But whether or not you initiated the encounter, the fact remains

that you were intimate with her, and you lied about it when you didn't even have to." I shake my head at him, my chest heavy with disappointment. "First the situation with Elliott Champion and now this. What other secrets are you keeping from me, Gunner? For all I know, you've been screwing Gianna every night you claimed you were working late."

His face darkens with fury, but when he speaks his voice is controlled. "Is that how you see me? As a cheater?"

"I don't know, Gunner! How can I trust you when you keep lying to me?"

He falls silent.

We're sitting on opposite ends of the seat, and the chasm between us has never felt wider. It scares me like nothing else.

I watch as he turns away to stare out the window, his profile in shadow. My heart is thudding and I can barely breathe.

"I'm not," he murmurs after a while.

"You're not what?"

"Having an affair with Gianna."

My throat tightens, though whether it's in relief or fear of his next words, I can't tell.

"Whatever you think of me, just know that I would never fuck another woman behind your back." He turns his head and pins me with his cold gaze. "If I ever decide I'm done with you, trust me, sweetheart, you'll know."

He lets the vaguely ominous threat hang between us, twisting my heart in knots.

Then he turns back to the window and doesn't say another word for the remainder of the drive home.

Chapter Thirty-Six



MARLOWE

“THANKS FOR THE RIDE,” I SAY gratefully to my classmate as we approach the house on Wednesday evening.

“It’s no trouble at all. I hope Valeria’s car repairs won’t be too expensive. My car needed a new transmission last year, and my bank account is *still* crying.” Neeraj looks around the sprawling estate and whistles in amazement. “So this is how the one percent lives, huh?”

A small, rueful smile is my only response.

He pulls up in front of the stone steps and peers up at the mansion with an awed expression. “I can’t believe you live here with Pantheon’s CEO.”

Not sure how much longer that’ll be the case, I think glumly. Gunner and I have barely spoken since our argument on Sunday night. I’ve been in limbo, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It’s an excruciating feeling that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

I force a cheerful smile. “Thanks again for the ride, Neeraj. I’ll see you in class next week.”

“You bet.” He smiles, dark eyes gleaming. “If you ever need another study partner, I’m really good at research.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Giving him one last smile, I climb out of the car and head up to the house.

“Marlowe, wait!”

I turn to watch as Neeraj jogs up the front steps with my backpack.

“You forgot this in the backseat.”

“Oh, crap. Yeah, I’ll definitely need that.” I take the backpack from him with a sheepish grin. “Thanks again.”

“No problem.” He winks and then jogs back down the steps just as Gunner arrives home.

My palms break into a nervous sweat as he emerges from the backseat of the car in a dark gray suit, jacket unbuttoned with no tie. With his phone pressed to his ear, he flicks a glance at Neeraj.

I cringe as my classmate grins like a starstruck teen and calls out, “Hey, how’s it going, Mr. Ransom? I brought your lovely lady home, safe and sound.”

Gunner nods coolly before shifting his attention to me. The look in his eyes makes nerves dance in my belly.

As he starts up the steps toward me, I mouth *Hi* so as not to disrupt his conversation.

He presses the mute button on his phone and kisses me briefly on the forehead. “New friend?”

“Classmate.” I wave goodbye to Neeraj and follow Gunner inside.

Mr. Leland greets us with his usual polished reserve. “Your luggage is packed and ready to go,” he informs Gunner, who nods distractedly and thanks him.

My heart pinches at the reminder that he’s leaving for Germany to attend a tech conference. I would have been playing hooky tomorrow to travel with him, but he rescinded the invitation shortly after our big fight in his office last week. He reasoned that it probably wasn’t a good idea for me to skip class after all. To hide my hurt, I agreed with him.

But in my weakest moments, when my insecurities are wreaking havoc on my mind, I jealously wonder if he found someone else to accompany him on his trip. Someone like Gianna.

I tamp down the thought as he starts across the foyer. “I was thinking we could eat dinner in the garden since it’s such a nice evening.”

“Not tonight,” he says over his shoulder. “I need to finish some paperwork before I leave in the morning.”

“Oh. Okay.” I swallow my disappointment and smile brightly at his retreating back. “Maybe when you get—”

“Sorry, babe. I have to wrap up this call.” He presses the mute button again, resuming his phone conversation as he walks down the hall and disappears around the corner.

Mrs. Calder appears at the top of the staircase, fastening on a pair of earrings. “Hello, dear. How was class?”

“Good.” I smile as she descends the stairs. “You look nice. Is that a new dress?”

“This old thing? Heavens, no. I’ve had it forever. I’m sure you’ve seen it before.”

I haven’t, but I know better than to contradict her. “Hot date?”

“Just having dinner with Dale. Nothing to make a fuss about.” But the faint blush on her cheeks is a dead giveaway.

“You kids have fun,” I say with a sly grin.

“We always do.” Her smile dims when she gets a closer look at me. “How are you, Marlowe?”

“I’m fine,” I say quickly—too quickly. “Just a little tired. Been doing lots of research for a paper that’s due soon.”

She nods slowly, but I know she’s not buying my excuse. Pursing her lips, she glances in the direction Gunner had gone and then turns back to me, studying my face for an uncomfortably long moment.

“I know you and Gunner have been going through a rough patch lately. No, don’t deny it,” she gently chides when I open my mouth. “Just because I stay out of your business doesn’t mean I’m clueless. Nothing happens under this roof that I

don't know about. And what I know, my dear girl, is that you're just as miserable as he is."

Tears burn my eyes and clog my throat, but I hold them back.

She cups my cheek in her hand, her touch exuding a comforting maternal warmth. "Things are complicated between you and Gunner, and there may be many more difficult times ahead. But as much as you're hurting right now, please believe me when I tell you that everything will work out in the end."

"I wish I shared your optimism," I mumble.

She gazes at me with gentle sympathy. "Ransom men are notoriously easy to love and hard to forget. Once you give them your heart, they don't ever give it back. They hold onto it, maybe selfishly, and it gets a little bumped and bruised along the way. But when a Ransom man loves you, he loves ferociously and with all his might. And he loves for a lifetime."

Her words are a soothing balm on my battered emotions. I close my eyes, bowing my head as a few errant tears escape.

When she draws me into a warm hug, it's all I can do not to break down sobbing in her arms. She holds me close, rubbing comforting circles on my back until a buzzing sound erupts from the depths of her large purse.

She lets out an exasperated sigh and releases me to retrieve her phone, rolling her eyes when she checks the screen. "Hold your horses, Dale. I'm coming," she huffs, texting him back with freshly manicured fingers. "Impatient old coot."

Despite my misery, I can't help grinning.

Mrs. Calder gives me a ruefully apologetic look. "I'd better go before he hotwires a car and hightails it over here."

My grin widens. "Has he ever done that before?"

She snorts. "This is Dale Ransom we're talking about. What *hasn't* he done?"

I laugh, thoroughly charmed as usual. "Give him my best."

“Will do, dear.” She pats my cheek and winks at me before sailing out the door.

I lock up behind her, then take a deep breath and head down the hall in search of Gunner.

I find him in the library, standing next to the bookshelves on the far side of the room. He’s looking down at an open book in his hands, his straight hair falling over his forehead.

Steeling my nerves, I square my shoulders and advance into the room. “Looking for something to read on the trip? Don’t tell me you’ve already finished *Klara and the Sun*?”

“Almost,” he murmurs without glancing up from his book. “Is something wrong with the Range Rover?”

“Not at all.” I keep my tone light. “Valeria and I had to meet some classmates for a group project, so we rode to class together. Afterward her car wouldn’t start and had to be towed. Neeraj was kind enough to give us a ride home.”

Gunner nods slowly and turns the page in his book.

“Please don’t tell me you’re mad,” I say, slightly exasperated. “Neeraj is just a classmate. I even rode in the backseat until Valeria was dropped off—”

“I’m not mad.” There’s no inflection in his voice. “As you’ve often reminded me, I don’t own you. You can ride with whoever you want.”

Warning bells start clanging in my head.

“What’s going on, Gunner?” I blurt out, overcome with frustration.

He finally looks up at me. His eyes are hooded, his expression smooth as glass. “What do you mean?”

“You know damn well what I mean! How much longer are you going to ice me out?”

He calmly closes the large book and tucks it under his arm. Glimpsing the front cover, I see that it’s a collector’s edition artbook featuring famous abstract painters.

My skin goes cold.

Is he giving the book to Gianna? Are they going to snuggle in bed poring over the glossy pages, admiring the beautiful artwork and discussing artists that inspire her?

“I don’t want to fight with you.” His voice is low and measured. “If you’re looking for a fight, you won’t get it from me.”

“I’m not looking for a fight!”

“Then why are you shouting?”

His reasonable tone only makes me feel hysterical. “Why are you acting like this, Gunner? Do you get off on torturing me?”

He stares at me, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “*I’m torturing you?*”

“You know you are! And it’s driving me—” I flinch when he suddenly slams the book down on a table.

I watch as he prowls toward me, forcing me backward like frightened prey retreating from a much larger, more lethal predator.

When my back meets the opposite bookshelf, I bravely lift my chin. “You’re—”

He grabs my face and crashes his mouth down on mine. The impact slams into me like a tsunami, tilting the ground beneath my feet. When I gasp, he thrusts his tongue into my mouth, and my entire body quakes from head to toe.

Plunging his hands into my hair, he kisses me almost violently. Impatient. Demanding. Furious.

I whimper his name, swamped in sensation, drowning in need. He bites at my bottom lip and licks into my mouth, his tongue lashing mine with ruthless strokes.

My head is spinning, my hands grasping for something to hold before landing on his shoulders. He presses me flat against the bookshelf until there’s no space left between us, and every breath I take is his.

Just when I think he's going to devour me whole, his kiss gentles, becoming sweet and tender. The sudden shift fills me with a fierce rush of longing and I moan softly, tangling my fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck.

He roughly breaks the kiss and stares down at me, both of us panting hard.

"Gunner ..." I trail off helplessly.

Closing his eyes, he rubs his nose against my cheek and hair, breathing me in as if for the last time.

When I reach up to touch his face, he abruptly pulls away and steps back.

Dread sits like a stone in my stomach. Lifting trembling fingers to my bruised lips, I whisper, "Why did that feel like a goodbye kiss?"

His eyes darken before he looks away from me, staring at a point above my head.

"Gunner?" I can hear the quiver of fear in my voice, and I hate myself for it.

He pushes his hands through his hair to smooth back the thick strands, visibly pulling himself together before he meets my eyes.

I say quietly, "Can we talk about what's happening here? Before you leave for your trip?"

I watch a mask slide over his face, as if he's erecting an invisible wall between us.

I want to wrap my arms around him and hold him tight. I want to remind him of all the things we felt for each other back on Kauai. All the unforgettable moments we shared, waltzing under the moonlight, making love beneath the stars, talking until sunrise.

I want to remind him of every promise he made to me. But looking at his emotionless face renders me mute, unable to speak another word.

"Alan Whitmore wants to hire you."

The sudden change of subject knocks me off kilter, and I stare at him in miserable confusion.

“He’s the CEO of a popular streaming service. I told him about you, and after reviewing your credentials, he wants to bring you onboard as their senior music curator. He’s offering you a great salary and benefits with a flexible work schedule. You have an interview on Friday morning, but it’s just a formality. The job’s yours if you want it.”

I shake my head slowly at him. “I don’t want your charity, Gunner.”

“This has nothing to do with charity. You have the right skills and qualifications—”

“Which he only knows about because I’m your girlfriend.” I soften my tone, not wanting to sound ungrateful. “I appreciate your help, Gunner. Truly. But I’m not interested.”

“Don’t be a fool,” he growls in frustration. “It’s a damn good opportunity.”

“I don’t doubt that. It sounds exciting. But I can’t accept the job. Not like this.”

He claws a hand through his hair, mussing it up again. “You’re being ridiculous and tiresomely stubborn.”

“So now I’m tiresome?”

“Right now, yes, you fucking are!”

I jab an accusing finger at the glossy artbook on the table. “Are you giving that to Gianna? Is she your new ingénue, Gunner? Are you replacing me with a younger, shinier model?”

He spears me with a dark look. “I’m not doing this with you anymore.”

His ominous words make my stomach knot up.

“Don’t you see what’s happening here?” I tell him, trying to control my rising panic. “You’re giving Harlan exactly what he wants, Gunner. Ever since I saw him that day at the café,

you've been pulling away from me. He wanted to cause division between us, and you're letting him—"

"No, *you* did that," Gunner snaps.

My eyes hurt from holding my tears at bay. But I look at him resolutely and say, "I'm not leaving, Gunner, and I'm not quitting this job."

"I'll make it easy for you then. You're fired."

I suck in a breath as if he'd punched me in the stomach. "What?"

"You heard me. Your services are no longer required."

"My ... *services*?" I repeat through bloodless lips. "I'm in love with—"

"I'm leaving for Germany tomorrow," he coldly cuts me off, without a trace of emotion. "I'll expect you gone when I get back."

His words run through me like a sword, bringing a rush of tears and a fresh surge of anger. "You're pushing me away because you're unwilling or incapable of committing to a serious relationship. I feel sorry for you."

His blue eyes turn to flinty ice. "I'll put your severance check in the mail tomorrow. I trust you can pick it up at your previous address?"

Gathering my tattered pride around me, I lift my chin. I won't beg even though I'm dying inside. "That's fine."

He nods curtly. "Goodbye, Marlowe."

"Goodbye, Mr. Ransom." I match his icy tone. "Wherever I end up working next, I hope I'll have much better luck with my new boss."

Something like regret flickers in his eyes before they harden again. He rakes me with one last dismissive glance, then grabs the artbook and stalks out the door.

I stand frozen in shock, unable to believe what just happened. As the shock gradually turns into raw anguish, I sag back against the bookshelf with a choked sob.

Just like that, the fairytale is over.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



MARLOWE

BY SOME MIRACLE I MAKE IT through the night, the next day, the next week and into the following month.

I survive, but I'm not really living. I'm just sort of existing, crushed by the weight of my heartache.

After the breakup, I moved back into my old apartment with Quinn. When the lease expired shortly afterward, we upgraded to a bigger apartment so we'd each have our own room.

A week later, Lilith Halifax called me.

"I hope you don't mind that Gunner gave me your number," she said. "As I told him, I truly enjoyed meeting you at the art opening last month. I was impressed with your viewpoints and the depth of your knowledge, and I'd like you to come work for me. I run an international organization called the Halifax Music Society. We're in dire need of a dedicated librarian to serve our members and administer our fellowship program. I know you're in grad school, so we can work around your schedule. I might not be able to match the salary Gunner was paying you, but I can provide an enriching experience with room for growth and many opportunities to indulge your love of music. I'd also like to mentor you, if you're open to learning."

Even though Lilith insisted otherwise, I suspected Gunner had orchestrated the generous job offer. But I couldn't prove it,

and I was undeniably drawn to the prospect of working for such a dynamic woman. So I took only a day to consider her offer before accepting.

I started the new job the following week, and so far so good. I enjoy interacting with the organization's members, answering their questions and helping them find the materials they're looking for. Next spring Lilith and I are traveling to Austria to meet with the curator of a rare classical music collection. We're also attending a concert at the Vienna Philharmonic, which ranks near the top of my bucket list.

While my professional life is on the upswing, my personal life is in shambles. Between work and school, my days have settled into a numbingly busy but predictable routine. I come home every evening and change into comfy sweats, pour a glass of wine and tackle my coursework, occasionally watching something mindless on Netflix. Dinner is always an afterthought, and sometimes I don't even bother.

Quinn has been a wonderful sounding board, letting me cry on her shoulder or just listening to me vent about damaged alpha males. She tries to lure me out of the doldrums by inviting me to hang out with her and Eric. But I don't want to be a third wheel, and my energy reserves are so low, the thought of putting on a cute outfit and going to a club makes me want to curl up in a ball.

No matter how hard I try, I can't get Gunner out of my head. Every time my phone rings, I hope it's him and I can't breathe. Every time I think of him moving on with someone else, I feel sick to my stomach.

I miss him so much. I miss the sound of his voice and the sexy rumble of his laughter. I miss hearing him call me kitten and smartass. I miss his mouthwatering scent and the heat of his skin. I miss being pulled onto his lap to cuddle and kiss. I miss our deep intellectual conversations, the way we probed and fed each other's minds. I miss his fierce lovemaking, the powerful thrust of his hips as he drove into me, working my body into a frenzy until I exploded.

I miss him beyond words. Almost beyond bearing.

Unfortunately, I'm not the only one who's miserable. Sansa has been moping around like she lost her best friend. Though I bought her new toys and tried to replicate Mrs. Calder's recipes, she doesn't seem to have much of an appetite—for food or sport.

"You can't really blame her," Quinn remarks one day. "She went from having the run of a palace to being banished to a nine-hundred-square-foot apartment. She probably feels like a dethroned queen reduced to living in squalor."

When Sansa meows plaintively and butts her head against Quinn's leg, she gives me a rueful look. "See? She agrees with my diagnosis."

As if I weren't wallowing in enough self-pity, Sansa's depression makes me feel like the worst cat parent in the world.

If my cramped abode isn't good enough for my beloved kitty, it definitely won't pass muster with my mother. Which is why I insist on meeting her and my sister at their hotel when they come to town the following weekend.

Mom booked the congressional suite at the Four Seasons. I agreed to pack an overnight bag and crash at the hotel while Quinn stays with Sansa. She knows my mother's visit has the potential to devolve into a shitshow, so she's relieved to be spared the drama.

On Friday morning, I drive to the hotel in the new silver Audi I bought with part of my severance check. Gunner paid me through the next nine months to complete what would have been a full year of employment. I wasn't expecting the additional funds, and my jaw dropped when I saw the amount. Gripping the check in my shaking hands, I felt a complicated tangle of sadness, gratitude, anger and humiliation. It was as though I'd outlived my usefulness to him, so he'd kicked me to the curb and tossed me some extra coins for my trouble.

My hurt and anger motivated me to splurge on a more expensive car than I normally would've considered. I figured if I'm going to be dumped by a billionaire, I might as well get an Audi out of it.

Reaching the luxury hotel, I valet park and take the elevator to my family's suite on the ninth floor.

Ember opens the door and wraps me up in the longest, tightest, most loving hug ever. By the time she releases me, I'm choking back tears.

"Wow, what a greeting," I try to joke.

She strokes my cheek, her eyes full of compassion. "I'm so sorry I couldn't get here sooner. Work has been—"

"Crazy, I know. It's okay," I assure her with a watery smile. "You're a busy lawyer. I'm just glad you came."

She pulls me inside and closes the door. "I wish I could've come alone—"

"I heard that," our mother says, emerging from her room. She gasps in shock when she sees me. "My goodness, you've lost so much weight!"

I force my lips into a facsimile of a smile. "Hello, Mother."

"Oh, darling." She gives me a perfunctory hug and an air kiss before pulling back. She lets her gaze run over me, then meets my eyes and shakes her head. "You poor thing. You've been too depressed to eat, haven't you? I suppose that's one benefit of getting dumped."

"Don't start," Ember warns sharply. "Don't you dare start."

"I'm just making an observation. She looks thinner than I've seen her in years. It's a compliment," Mom assures me, patting my shoulder.

Her highlighted blond hair is a cascade of perfectly sculpted waves. Her bold red lipstick offsets her green eyes and creamy complexion.

While Ember wheels my bag to the bedroom we're sharing, Mom continues inspecting me for defects, which she always finds.

"Your hair needs deep conditioning. And when was your last trim?"

“I don’t know, Mom,” I say with a sigh. “I’ve been busy.”

“Aren’t we all?” She combs her fingers through my hair. “Your father blessed you with his luscious locks, right down to the rich color.” Something softens in her eyes, so fleeting that I almost miss it before she *tsk-tsk*s me. “Never neglect your hair, no matter how busy or depressed you are.”

I stifle another sigh. “Sure, Mom.”

Ember shuffles back into the living room and flops down on the plush couch, yawning as she stretches her arms above her head. “What do you want to do today, Mar? I wouldn’t mind touring the state capitol and your school campus, and maybe later we can hit the warehouse district. But we’re at your complete disposal,” she says around another yawn. “Just let me grab a power nap—”

“A *power nap*?” Mom echoes indignantly. “We didn’t come all this way to sleep or sightsee! We’re on a mercy mission. Your sister is in distress, and I have just the cure for her blues.”

“A new vibrator?” Ember suggests.

“No, silly girl. A trip to the spa!”

“The spa?” I say with as much enthusiasm as I’d muster for a root canal. “I’m really not up for—”

“Too late. I already made reservations.” Mom claps her hands together. “Off we go, girls!”

We head down to the posh spa for massages, facials and mani-pedis. Afterward we climb into the executive car that Mom rented for the weekend. The friendly driver takes us across town to an upscale Italian bistro, which we enter through a charming courtyard with a fountain and wrought iron tables.

Over lunch I tell Mom about my new job, but I sense she’s only half listening. My suspicion is confirmed when, barely seconds after I finish talking, she pivots to the next topic—the only topic she cares about.

“So what exactly happened between you and Gunner? Your sister has been stingy with the details.”

“With good reason,” Ember grits out. “You’re not exactly the most sympathetic—”

“Nonsense. I’m a mother. No mother wants to see her child suffering, which Marlowe clearly is.” She reaches across the table and pats my hand. “Tell me what happened.”

I take a sip of water to lubricate my throat so my voice won’t crack when I talk about Gunner. “He had control issues, which caused some friction in our relationship. And I had difficulty ... trusting him.”

Mom narrows her eyes. “Did he cheat on you?”

I swallow tightly. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think* so?”

“No,” I say with more conviction. “He didn’t cheat.”

“Did he ever”—Mom lowers her voice—“hit you?”

“Of course not!”

“Just making sure. You said he had control issues—”

“Not like that,” I say vehemently. “Gunner would never lay a hand on me.”

“Glad to hear it. One never knows with powerful men who’re used to getting their own way.” Mom purses her lips, studying me shrewdly. “So what went wrong between you and Gunner? From what I could tell, he was very good to you.”

“He was,” I mumble miserably, pushing my steamed mussels around the plate. “He was wonderful. Totally romantic and amazing. But his inability to ...” I trail off, reluctant to badmouth the man I love. “I just think he has mommy issues. Daddy issues, too.”

“So do you. Congratulations. You’re perfect for each other.”

I frown. “I don’t have daddy issues. Dad was—”

“Perfect? Yes, in the eyes of a twelve-year-old girl who thought her father could do no wrong, Bowen *was* perfect. Except he wasn’t.” The last is spoken with a bitterness that stiffens my spine and raises Ember’s eyebrow.

She looks at me, then at our mother. “Is there something you’re not telling us about Dad?”

Mom presses her lips together. “Your father was a very good man. But he wasn’t perfect. No man is.” She takes a shaky sip of wine, sets the glass down and pins me with a hard look. “All your life you’ve put your father on a pedestal—a pedestal he never asked for. Over the years, I’ve watched you compare every boy to him and find them lacking. I don’t know the whole story behind your breakup with Gunner. I don’t know if you pushed him away like all the others. What I do know is that if you keep holding men to some mythical standard of perfection, you’re going to end up alone and bitter.”

A heavy silence engulfs the table, broken only by the tinkle of china and silverware as we finish our lunch without further conversation.

Although I manage to eat, I can barely taste my meal. My head is spinning, doubts and fears swirling in my gut. Am I responsible for the breakup? Did I make unreasonable demands of Gunner? Did I drive him away?

The troubling questions only serve to ramp up my misery and angst.

As we’re leaving the restaurant, my mother says suddenly, “Oh look, darling. Isn’t that your former beau?”

I follow her gaze to a group of businessmen seated around a table in the corner of the courtyard. When I see Gunner among them, my heart slams into my sternum.

He’s leaning back in his chair, a goblet of red wine cradled in his hand, lips twitching indulgently as he listens to some raucous joke. He’s not wearing a suit today, just dark slacks and a blue button-down shirt, cuffs rolled up and collar unbuttoned.

Casual Fridays, I think with a pang as I drink in the sight of him, not knowing when or if I'll ever get another chance.

“What a delightful surprise,” Mom coos excitedly. “Let’s go say hello.”

I shake my head. “He’s having lunch—”

“Don’t be a coward, darling. Fortune favors the brave.” Her manicured talons curl into my arm, not so subtly dragging me forward.

As laughter erupts from the table of businessmen, Gunner turns his head in my direction.

When our eyes meet, I skid to a halt. For a split second, something like pleasure lights up his face, disappearing so quickly I wonder if I only imagined it.

He watches me, his eyes veiled and distant. When I remain frozen in place, he sets his glass down, excuses himself from the table and begins walking toward me. I feel my chest tighten and my body start to shake as my mother lets out a purr of approval.

I force myself to keep moving forward. His stare never wavers from me, and I don’t miss the way his eyes skim over my body, sending heat sizzling across my skin.

And then finally we’re standing face to face. Or rather face to chest, since the top of my head has never cleared his shoulders.

“Marlowe.” His voice is low, with just a hint of a rasp.

“Hello,” I say calmly even though everything in me aches to touch him, to press myself against him and feel his arms envelop me once again. “My mother and sister are in town. We were just leaving when we saw you—”

“And I insisted that we come over and say hello,” Mom gushes in a breathy voice I’ve never heard before.

Between clenched teeth and a tight smile, I introduce Gunner to my mother and sister. They shake hands and exchange warm pleasantries. Though Ember vowed to kick his ass if she ever met him, she looks a bit swoony now that she’s

actually in his presence. I can't really blame her. He seems to have that effect on all women.

Case in point, my mother can't stop fluttering her lashes at him. "It's wonderful to finally make your acquaintance, Gunner. Though I was hoping to meet you under better circumstances."

I can't interpret the flicker of emotion in Gunner's eyes. It's there and gone in a flash before he smooths his features into a polite mask, then tips his head to my mother and sister.

"Pleasure meeting you both. Enjoy your visit." Sparing me a brief glance, he turns and walks back to his lunch companions.

As we leave the courtyard, Ember wraps an arm around my waist, holding me up when my legs threaten to buckle. She guides me into the backseat of the executive car and hugs me close with her arm around my shoulders, infusing me with her warmth and strength.

"Are you okay?" she whispers.

I'm not, and she knows it. My heart feels like it's breaking all over again. But I refuse, absolutely refuse, to give in to the tears pricking my eyes.

After speaking to our driver, Mom slides onto the opposite bench seat with a dramatic sigh. "Well, *that* was certainly interesting."

Ember shoots her a "not now" look.

She ignores her, fanning her face as she gushes breathlessly, "Gunner is even handsomer in person. So tall, so virile. What is he? Six foot four? Good heavens. And what about those gorgeous blue eyes? And that *voice*—"

"Mom," Ember warns.

"What? Just because he broke up with your sister doesn't make him any less attractive." She sighs pityingly. "My poor daughter. No wonder you couldn't resist him. You never stood a chance in hell."

Ember skewers her with a glare. “Maternal sensitivity. It’s a thing, Mother. You should try it sometime.”

Mom just shakes her head at me, her expression full of disappointment.

Ember squeezes my hand and mouths, *You’re going to be okay.*

I wish I believed her.

WHEN WE RETURN TO OUR HOTEL suite, Ember and I head to the deck overlooking Lady Bird Lake. After the run-in with my ex, I need to regroup before making any evening plans.

I’m secretly hoping our mother will retreat to her room to make a phone call or take a nap, anything that will keep her out of our hair for a while.

Disappointingly, she brings out a bottle of wine and three glasses and makes herself comfortable next to Ember. She pours wine for them both, frowning when I decline. She probably wants to ply me with enough alcohol to loosen my tongue and get me oversharing about Gunner.

Not a chance.

“What a lovely view,” she says, admiring the lake. “I must say, I rather like what I’ve seen of Austin so far.”

“So do I,” Ember agrees.

“Don’t go getting any crazy ideas about relocating.” Mom pauses. “Unless you plan to make a play for Gunner’s twin brother.”

Ember rolls her eyes. “Here we go again.”

“I’m just saying. *Someone* needs to lasso one of those long, tall Texans.”

Ember scrunches up her nose. “Long, tall Texans. Isn’t that the name of a book series by—”

“Diana Palmer. One of my favorites.” Mom sips her wine, watching me over the rim of her glass.

I have a bad feeling she's going to bring up my nonexistent love life again. Hoping to distract her, I clap my hands together and smile brightly. "So what should we do tonight?"

Ember grins. "I'm game for anything."

Mom heaves a long, put-upon sigh. "If you were still dating Gunner, we could have been lounging around his palatial estate right now. I was *really* looking forward to that."

"Sorry to ruin your plans," I say, trying to keep my voice even.

"Honestly, darling, there's still hope for you and Gunner. I mean, he didn't seem terribly happy to see you, I'll admit. But that doesn't mean he's already moved on."

My heart twists at the careless indelicacy of her words. "He broke up with me in the library, which he knew was my favorite room in the house," I say bitterly. "Less than two weeks later, I saw a tabloid picture of him leaving a restaurant with another woman, and it wasn't a business dinner. Trust me, he's moved on."

Ember winces sympathetically.

Mom's lipsticked mouth turns down in a displeased frown.

Desperate to change the depressing subject, I muster a teasing grin for my sister. "Maybe by the end of the weekend I'll have you convinced that you belong here with me."

"Don't count on it." Mom pats Ember's knee. "Your sister loves practicing law. She would never jeopardize her career trajectory by quitting a job in her first year."

Something inscrutable flickers in Ember's eyes, her fingers tightening around her glass.

I shoot her a questioning look.

She ducks her head, avoiding my eyes as she gulps down her wine.

Mom gives me a tight smile. "Ember's not flighty like you. She never would have applied to grad school on a whim and

gallivanted off to a whole other state without securing employment first.”

I can feel the hurt little girl of my childhood kicking and clawing her way to the surface, demanding to be heard. I push her back down and grind my teeth, trying to maintain control of my emotions.

“You’re right,” I say evenly. “Ember has always had more common sense than me. That’s why we get along so well. Opposites attract.”

Despite my self-deprecating response, Mom continues needling me, spoiling for a fight she’ll always win. “I should have known you wouldn’t be able to hold onto a billionaire. You always make everything so infuriatingly difficult.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demand, digging my nails into my palms.

She spears me with her frosty green gaze. “It took you five years to graduate college. Since moving here in May, you’ve lost not one but *two* jobs. If you’re wondering why I paid scant attention as you prattled on about your new job, it’s because I don’t expect you to be there much longer.”

I hear Ember’s breath hitch sharply. Or maybe that’s mine.

Mom sets her glass down hard. “I’m sorry, Marlowe, but your track record doesn’t lie, and the sad truth is that you fail more often than you succeed.”

The scathing indictment rips through my soul like a grenade, detonating my fury.

“*What the hell is your problem with me?*” I howl at her like a wounded animal. “*Why do you hate me so much?*”

She blinks rapidly in surprise. “What—”

“Don’t play innocent, Mom!” Ember shouts. “You were *way* out of line and you fucking know it!”

I’m up and out of my seat, trembling with pent-up rage born of rejection. “You hate me because I was close to Dad. Because we bonded over music and you felt left out. That’s why you gave away his records!”

She leaps to her feet, glaring furiously at me. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Yes, I do!”

“You idolized him—”

“And you resented me for it! You always have!”

“WITH GOOD REASON!”

Her shrill outburst cuts through the air, stealing my breath and knocking me back a step.

In the utter silence that follows, Ember and I stare at her in openmouthed disbelief.

She scrubs a trembling hand over her face and turns away from us, staring blindly across the lake. “You were so young when he died. Neither of you understood what was going on.”

“What’re you talking about?” I sink back down in my seat, my voice barely a breath. “What was going on?”

Hugging her midsection, Mom starts pacing up and down the deck. “Your father had been having headaches for weeks. Terrible, crippling migraines. I was so damn worried about him. I kept nagging him to go see his doctor, and he kept promising he would. But there was always another song to compose. Another recital to rehearse for. Another music class to teach. Another contest to judge. He kept putting off making an appointment, and sometimes he’d outright lie about having a headache when I could clearly see he was in pain.”

My throat tightens as I remember the time I found my father huddled over his piano, pale and shaking, head cradled in his hands. Seeing him like that terrified me. But he’d blamed the migraine on writer’s block, and I’d naively taken him at his word.

Mom stops pacing and faces me, her eyes flashing with emotion. “You had a piano recital one winter afternoon. It was circled on the calendar, but somehow it slipped your father’s mind. I had already phoned you from work to tell you that Aunt Nora would be taking you because we couldn’t make it. But once your dad remembered, he canceled his doctor’s

appointment to attend your performance. I told him there would be plenty of others, but he insisted on going. He wanted to surprise you—”

“*No*,” I whisper, shaking my head. My heart is pounding with dread and I can feel the ground crumbling beneath my feet as she keeps talking.

“I blew up at him. Told him you were a good pianist but you’d never be as gifted as him. I told him to stop filling your head with foolish dreams, and he got angry and hung up on me.” Mom sets her jaw. “On the way to your recital, he had a massive stroke and veered off the road, slamming into a light post—”

“Nooo!” I cry out tearfully as Ember claps a hand over her mouth. “You told us it was a hit-and-run!”

“I know.” A single tear escapes the corner of Mom’s eye. She takes an angry swipe at it and sniffs hard. “The autopsy revealed that his headaches were caused by a treatable brain hemorrhage, which a CT scan would have detected if he’d only gotten help sooner.” Her nostrils flare, suppressing emotion. “After he died, I couldn’t look at his record collection without falling to pieces. So I packed it up, loaded up his van and headed to a local charity.” She pauses before whispering almost inaudibly, “I never made it.”

I stare at her in shock. “You mean ... ?”

“I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of the records. I couldn’t do that to you or your father. But I couldn’t keep them in the house either. They were an unbearable reminder that he was never coming home. His piano was, too. But I didn’t want to deprive you of practicing and honing your talents, though I died a little inside each time I watched you play, your dark hair falling forward, the way you closed your eyes like him.” The sorrow ravaging her features breaks my heart. “For my sanity, the records had to go. So I drove to a storage facility and locked them away.”

All the air rushes out of my lungs.

Ember shakes her head slowly, her face ashen. “All these years ... you let us think you gave them to charity.”

Mom nods and closes her eyes, her voice hoarse. “I was so hurt and angry. Your father was my best friend. My whole damn world. We were supposed to grow old and gray together. He was supposed to walk both of you down the aisle someday.” Her lower lip trembles, her voice rising in pitch as she asserts, “I’ll never forgive myself for arguing with him the day he died. And I’ll never forgive *him* for leaving me to raise our beautiful girls alone!”

Overwhelmed by her heartbreaking revelations, I burst into tears. It sets off a chain reaction, and soon we’re all crying.

When Mom sits next to me and pulls me into a fierce hug, I blubber tearfully against her shoulder, “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to know,” she sobs brokenly. “I knew you’d blame yourself, and I couldn’t saddle you with such a heavy burden. What happened to your father wasn’t your fault, and don’t you ever believe otherwise!”

I weep harder. We both do.

I’m remembering that awful day eleven years ago. I remember standing at my father’s gravesite, sobbing desperately as I watched his coffin being lowered into the cold ground. The finality of it hit me hard. Suddenly I understood that I would never see him again. I’d never receive one of his crinkly-eyed smiles or feel the reassuring warmth of his hug. I’d never watch another Steelers game or attend another concert with him. I’d never hear the melodious notes wafting from his piano when I ran through the front door after school.

The realization that he was gone forever was unspeakably painful. Seeking comfort and connection, I’d reached for my mother’s hand only to be rebuffed when she snatched herself away from me.

So much of the past makes sense now. If only I’d put the puzzle pieces together much sooner. But how could I when my mother was keeping so many secrets?

I don't know how long we hold each other before she draws back and strokes my face with a tenderness I've never felt from her before.

"I'm so sorry I let my grief and resentment poison our relationship. I never should have discouraged you from pursuing a music career. I didn't want to be reminded of your father, and that was horribly selfish of me." She wipes the wetness off my cheeks and holds my face between her hands, our foreheads touching. "I know the hurt and damage I've caused can't be repaired overnight. But I hope one day you can forgive me."

I swallow tightly, my eyes closing as she gently kisses the top of my head. My throat is raw and my chest aches from sobbing so hard. It hurts like hell knowing that my poor father was in so much pain and never uttered a word of complaint. He sat at the piano with me, teaching me songs, laughing and teasing, never letting on that he was suffering. That's going to haunt me forever.

Opening my eyes, I meet my mother's earnest gaze. "It ... it's going to take time," I say thickly. "I know you were devastated over losing Dad, but you made my life a living hell, Mom. You made me feel worthless and unloved, something no parent should *ever* do to their child. You had your reasons and I accept your apology. But I ... I need time to process everything you've just told us. I need time to heal."

"Of course, baby," she whispers, brushing my hair back from my face. "You deserve so much better than the horrific version of me you've gotten all these years. I'm going to spend the rest of my life earning your forgiveness, if that's what it takes. You hear me, baby? I'm going to be here for you the way I should have been all along."

I swallow hard and nod. I don't want to be at odds with her anymore, so I'm willing to give peace a chance.

Ember joins us on the couch for a group hug, Mom embracing us on either side.

"I love you girls so much." She kisses our foreheads in turn, then drops her head back against the seat cushion and

closes her eyes, emotionally drained. “God, that was long overdue.”

“Way overdue,” I agree.

She wipes her face and gives me and Ember a teary smile, a shadow of sorrow lingering in her eyes. “You know what we should watch for old times’ sake? *Sixteen Candles*.”

My mind flashes to that night in the library with Gunner: sitting on a table sharing a carton of ice cream, our lips melting together in a movie-perfect kiss.

The bittersweet memory, coupled with the emotional cyclone I’ve just endured, cause me to burst into fresh tears.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



GUNNER

AFTER FIVE YEARS OF QUIETLY SQUIRRELING away money, my father bought a horse ranch outside Austin. It's the first piece of property he's owned in years, since losing everything to gambling debts.

The old ranch house needs a new roof and paint job, the stables need cleaning and the fences need repairs. It's a major fixer-upper, but Dad couldn't be prouder or more excited to tackle the renovations.

Near the end of October, he hires a work crew to help whip the place into shape. On Saturday morning, Maverick and I show up at the crack of dawn, roll up our sleeves and pitch in.

I've always enjoyed physical labor. Today, more than ever, I welcome the opportunity to channel my restless energy into raking out stalls, stacking bales of hay and pounding fence posts under the burning sun. As sweat drips into my eyes and soaks my back, I rip my shirt off and dive right back into work. The physical exertion invigorates me, helps quiet the painful thoughts churning in my head.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my father and brother trading concerned glances. But I don't slow down. I work faster, harder, determined to purge my mind of memories.

Memories of the woman who stole my heart and changed me forever.

Jaw brutally tight, I slam a sledgehammer against a wall, feeling the satisfying impact in my chest and arms. I pull the hammer back and swing it again and again, knocking a deeper hole in the wall as concrete crumbles beneath my blows. With my muscles burning and adrenaline pumping through my veins, I can almost pretend that my heart isn't broken beyond repair.

AFTER A HARD MORNING'S WORK, WE stop for lunch.

As we clomp into the house covered in dirt and sweat, Mrs. Calder clucks her tongue and orders us to wash up before stepping foot in the kitchen. When we're sufficiently clean, we pile our plates with food and hunker under a shade tree to wolf down the delicious barbecue she made. It's the most substantial thing I've eaten in weeks, so it tastes even better.

As Mrs. Calder circles the picnic table refilling everyone's drinks, she squeezes my shoulder in approval. I don't have the heart to tell her that my rediscovered appetite is probably only temporary.

After the workers leave for the day, my father and I sit drinking lemonade on the wraparound veranda overlooking the horse stables and paddock. Giant oaks dot the landscape, the leaves just beginning to turn orange and yellow.

Dad drains his lemonade and smacks his lips. "Sunshine in a glass. Just like old times, ain't it, son?"

I smile faintly and nod.

He pats his flat stomach with a grin. "Gemma Louise is trying to fatten me up. Says I've lost too much weight."

"You have." I look at him sideways, lips twitching. "So what's the deal with you two? Is she moving in with you?"

"I'm working on it," he says with a sly wink.

"I bet you are."

He laughs. "You can't keep her to yourself, Gunny boy. She was mine first."

I snort and roll my eyes, but we both know he's right.

Grinning broadly, he gets up and saunters to the railing, spreading his arms along the wooden handrail. “Gemma Louise and I used to lay by the creek every summer, catching fireflies and talking about our hopes and dreams. One time I told her I was gonna buy a horse ranch someday and name a horse after her. Instead of being flattered like most girls would’ve been, she thought I was making a wisecrack about her teeth. She wore braces to fix an overbite and was mighty sensitive about it. So she gave me a good whack upside the head, and we ended up tussling in the grass. Dang near rolled ourselves right into the creek.”

A low laugh escapes me, such a rarity these days that it feels foreign.

Dad grins at me before turning away to survey his new land with pride and satisfaction. “I’m going to make this place a home, Gunn. A *real* home that my sons will enjoy visiting with their wives and children. We’ll have cookouts and picnics and birthday parties with piñatas. We’ll ride horses, play football and freeze tag, watch fireworks on the Fourth of July.”

“Sounds good, Dad,” I murmur, rocking listlessly back and forth on the creaky porch swing.

He lifts his face to the sky and inhales deeply. “It’s not every man who gets a second chance to do right by his family.”

“Just focus on staying sober, Dad. That’s all we ask.”

“I know, son.” His eyes close, and he seems to be simply enjoying the warm breeze against his face until he says, “Marlowe would make a wonderful daughter-in-law.”

My mellow mood instantly evaporates.

Heedless of my glare, he doggedly continues, “*She’s* the woman I picture by your side when you and your family come to visit. She wouldn’t care if she gained a few pounds after birthing your babies—”

“Dad—”

“She’d chase the kids around the yard without worrying about ruining her pedicure. She wouldn’t turn up her nose at

helping out in the kitchen. She wouldn't complain about mosquitos while sitting around a campfire roasting marshmallows. She'd be a joy to have around. A breath of fresh air. Unlike Laurene 'Miss Hotel Heiress' Vandenberg. Or that ditzy little artist you've been seeing—"

"Enough," I snap.

"I'm just saying." He glances over his shoulder at me. "You know I'm right."

I clench my jaw hard enough to break bone. "First of all, I'm not seeing Gianna. It was *one* lousy date."

A week after Marlowe moved out, Gianna called me up and invited me to dinner. Her treat, she insisted, to repay me for everything I'd done to launch her art career. She badgered me for days, calling and texting until I finally capitulated.

Eager to impress, she picked me up in her Porsche and drove to a high-end restaurant with a tasting menu. I barely made it through the first course. After just two minutes of her insipid babbling, I wanted to gouge my ears out with a shrimp fork.

The longer the meal dragged on, the more I yearned for Marlowe's sparkling intellect. Her sharp wit. Her bewitching laughter. Her infectious charm.

She was only a year older than Gianna, but it might as well have been ten. The difference in their maturity levels was off the charts.

When Gianna accidentally knocked a plate of tuna carpaccio out of our waiter's hand, she turned several shades of red before bursting into hysterical giggles that drew disapproving stares.

"Oh, my God!" she squealed after the waiter cleaned up the mess and hurried away. "You must think I'm a total klutz!"

"Not at all," I murmured. I'd take clumsiness over brainlessness any day, though Gianna was veering perilously close to embodying both.

“You’ve got me so nervous,” she admitted breathlessly. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I’ve had a crush on you since I was eighteen. Your first GQ cover was my Insta profile pic for the longest time. You’re so damn smart and sophisticated, not to mention freaking hot. It’s totally nerve-racking!”

I smiled kindly. “You don’t have to be nervous, Gianna. I don’t bite.”

“Not even if I want you to?” In the blink of an eye, she went from flustered to flirty.

She was a beautiful woman, no doubt about it. It would have been so easy to take her home and fuck her silly little brains out. God knew I needed to blow off some steam and forget my troubles for a few hours.

But I had no interest in sharing my bed with her or any other woman. I’d only recently allowed the new cleaning service to change my sheets, because I was pathetically clinging to the last traces of Marlowe’s fading scent.

After dinner Gianna drove me home and boldly propositioned me, sliding her hand up my thigh until I caught her wrist to stop her.

When she shot me a surprised look, I said quietly but firmly, “Thank you for dinner. But I’m afraid our date ends here.”

She looked genuinely astounded. “If you’re worried about my dad, he doesn’t have to know. And honestly, he wouldn’t even mind if we hooked up. He thinks the world of you and would love to have you as a son-in-law.”

Jesus! Jumping the gun much?

I gave her a long look, watching her falter and blush under my gaze. “I’m grateful for all the support your father has given me over the years. For that reason, I could never disrespect him by using his daughter’s body for stress relief. Which is all you would ever mean to me, Gianna. Do you understand what I’m saying? This”—I motioned between us—“is never going to happen.”

She looked crushed. Then angry. “You’re still hung up on your ex. But I saw a picture of her on some music blog. Her best friend’s dating the lead guitarist of some indie band. She and Marlowe were backstage after their concert, and the drummer had his arm around Marlowe’s shoulders. If they’re not already hooking up, they probably will be soon.”

Everything in me went ballistic at this news, but I kept my tone remarkably even. “If you ever need my help, you’ll have it. But that’s all I can give you, Gianna. Nothing more.” Before she could say anything else, I got out of the car and closed the door, literally and metaphorically.

“Was that the reason?” My father’s voice breaks into my thoughts.

I frown at him. “What?”

He’s watching me, his eyes speculative and assessing. “Is that why you ended things with Marlowe? To see other people? To finish sowing your wild oats?”

I grit my teeth and fight the urge to yell. “For the last time, it wasn’t working out between us. We’re too different—”

Dad huffs a laugh. “Who you think you foolin’? That pretty little lady is smart as a whip and stubborn as hell. You met your match and then some.”

Pain sears through my chest. But I say nothing, calmly crossing one boot-clad foot over the other.

“Maverick could tell you were in love with Marlowe the night she played the piano at your dinner party. He says he took one look at your face and knew you were already a goner.”

I swallow hard and glance away from my father, afraid he’ll see the fear and vulnerability in my eyes.

Letting Marlowe go was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. When I walked out on her that day, I had to stop outside the library and lean back against the wall just to catch my breath. My chest felt so tight I thought I was having a fucking heart attack.

I knew getting over her would be brutal, but I vastly underestimated the aching emptiness and bottomless pain that would engulf me in the days and weeks ahead.

Since she's been gone, I wake up heartbroken every morning. Every breath without her feels like a hot knife ripping through my lungs. I miss her so much I've lost whole days at a time just thinking about her. Wanting her. Needing her.

I am so fucking doomed.

My father gives me a remorseful look. "It's my fault that you and Maverick have commitment issues. Mine and, to a lesser extent, your mother's fault."

That makes me scowl. "I don't have commitment issues. Let's not forget I was engaged for six damn months."

"Ah, son," Dad says with a sad shake of his head. "You proposed to Laurene because you thought it was the right thing to do. Not because you loved her or believed she could make you happy."

He's right, much as it galls me to admit it.

When I found myself staring down the barrel of my thirtieth birthday, I'd decided it was time to find a suitable woman to settle down and start a family with. Despite my dysfunctional upbringing, I'd always wanted children of my own to love and nurture, to teach right from wrong, to pass my legacy to.

I approached the idea of marriage as just another business transaction, one where I identify solid prospects and negotiate the best deal. I ultimately chose Laurene for her pedigree. As an heiress, she understood the world I came from and the pressures I faced to remain at the top of my industry.

My reasoning was shrewd, practical and largely devoid of sentiment. I'd watched my parents' marriage fall apart and vowed not to repeat the same mistakes with Laurene. I thought I would grow to love her in time.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Restless and agitated, I shove to my feet and pace from one end of the veranda to the other. I eventually end up standing next to my father, gripping the wooden handrail as I wrestle with my anger, bitterness and regret. So much fucking regret.

Dad looks out across the pasture with a faraway look in his eyes. "I married the wrong blonde," he says, almost to himself.

I frown at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I should've held out for the only woman I've ever loved. It means I should have married Gemma Louise." He meets my eyes. "Lost chances can rob a man of his soul and his reason for being. I learned that lesson the hard way, and maybe too late. But it's not too late for you, son."

I stare at him, the visceral truth of his words hitting me square in the chest.

Before I can respond, my mother comes strolling onto the veranda sipping a Bloody Mary. About an hour ago, she arrived in her helicopter to inspect the ranch, citing her expertise as the granddaughter of a legendary horse breeder. After touring the property with Dad and giving her input, she stayed to have cocktails with Mrs. Calder.

I watch now as she dubiously eyes the rickety porch swing, then crosses the veranda to sit on the new rattan sofa. She sips her drink and lets out a languid sigh. "Such a lovely day, isn't it?"

Dad and I exchange wry glances.

Mom has been preening with satisfaction since learning that I broke up with Marlowe. My apparent misery has her in such good spirits that she's even willing to tolerate Dad's presence for a few hours.

"You'll never guess who I just spoke to on the phone."

Neither Dad nor I venture a guess. We know she won't keep us in suspense.

"It was Laurene, of course." Mom looks borderline giddy. "We had the most pleasant conversation, catching each other

up on our lives. She was particularly pleased to hear about your recent availability, Gunner.”

“I bet she was,” Dad mutters under his breath.

Mom shoots him a narrow look.

He merely chuckles, long past fearing her evil eye.

She dismisses him with an elegant wave of her hand before returning her attention to me. “Getting back to the topic—”

“I’d rather not,” I bite out.

She purses her lips, contemplating me as she swirls the liquid in her glass. “Laurene would really love to see you. Now that you’re ... unattached, perhaps the two of you might—”

“No.” I tighten my jaw, striving for patience. “We’re not getting back together.”

“But, darling—”

“Give it a fucking rest.”

Everyone turns to see Maverick standing at the screen door, a dark scowl on his face under the dusty brim of his Stetson.

Mom sniffs. “I was just saying—”

“I heard what you were saying.” He steps onto the veranda, his boots hitting the floorboard with a menacing thud. “How selfish can you be, Mom?”

Dad straightens from the railing. “Now, son, let’s not ruin this nice day—”

“Look at Gunner’s face. Does he look like he’s having a nice day?” It’s a rhetorical question, and Maverick doesn’t wait for an answer as he prowls over to Mom. “How can you sit there trying to pressure him into taking Laurene back? Have you been living under a rock since July? Do you not realize he’s in love with someone else? Or are you pretending otherwise because you don’t approve?”

Mom's face takes on a look of haughty condescension. "Marlowe clearly wasn't right for your brother. He and Laurene are more compatible—"

"Says who?"

Mom narrows her eyes, resenting the challenge. "I'm his mother. I know what's best for him."

A sneer twists Maverick's mouth. "The only reason you love Laurene is because she reminds you of yourself—a spoiled, shallow, stuck-up blonde who thinks the whole world revolves around her."

Mom gasps, affronted.

"Maverick," I warn.

"No. I'm tired of biting my tongue. She needs to hear the truth." He glares at our scandalized mother. "Do you have any idea what it's like growing up with a mom who hates you? Who regrets your very existence? Who blames you for every sin your father ever committed? Do you know how sadistic you have to be to tell a nine-year-old boy that a trust fund and a pretty face are all he'll ever be good for?"

Mom stares at him in horrified denial. "I ... I ..."

"Oh yes, Mommy Dearest. That was one of the kinder gems you bestowed upon me and Gunner. Unshockingly, your toxicity did a real number on us. While I avoided any serious entanglements, Gunner forced himself to stay in soul-sucking relationships long after they ran their course. He needed to prove you wrong, and on some subconscious level, he wanted to please you. Why else would he even *consider* marrying a woman who shares your worst flaws?"

Mom glances at me to gauge my reaction, her delicate jaw trembling.

"He'll never admit it, not even to himself. But it's true." A streak of dark ruthlessness burns in Maverick's ice-blue eyes. "Do you know why you're still able to hold your head up in high society?"

"That's enough, Mav," I growl.

He ignores me, laser-focused on our mother's increasingly pale face. "How scandalized would those Highland Park blue bloods be if they found out you fucked Harlan Pierce when he was barely legal?"

She lets out a strangled cry.

Dad loudly interjects, "Now, son—"

"Stay out of this," Maverick snarls without taking his eyes off Mom. "It's bad enough that you hooked up with our worst enemy—the bullying asshole who slandered our names every fucking chance he got. You betrayed your own sons. And then in an ironic twist of karmic payback, *you* got betrayed. See, Mother, your little boy toy secretly recorded your hotel tryst and threatened to leak the tape. He wanted to humiliate you. Ruin you. And he would have if Gunner hadn't stopped him."

Whatever blood remains in Mom's face drains out. Even Dad looks shocked.

"Gunner never told you because he wanted to spare your feelings and preserve your dignity." Maverick smirks. "You're lucky. I wouldn't have been as merciful."

Mom looks at me wildly, her chin quivering. "I never knew ..."

I can only stare at her, rigid with frustration. I didn't want her to find out, and definitely not like this. But my brother has obviously reached his breaking point, and like a runaway freight train rushing at full throttle, he can't be stopped.

"You owe him, Mother. You owe him your undying gratitude for burying your scandalous secret and protecting your precious virtue. You owe him for safeguarding your status as the apple of your parents' eye." Maverick pins her with a look sharp enough to flay the skin off her body. "Instead of rejecting the woman he loves, you should be using every manipulative trick in your arsenal to convince him to go after Marlowe. Because if you can't see that he's completely lost without her, then you're an even worse mother than you've already proved yourself to be."

In the stunned silence that follows, I exchange grim looks with my father.

Half a second later, Mom bursts into tears.

Hardening his jaw, Maverick pushes the brim of his Stetson low over his eyes and then stalks back into the house, slamming the screen door behind him.

Dad tucks a handkerchief into Mom's hand and awkwardly pats her shoulder. When she sobs louder, he sends me a sympathetic look before beating a hasty retreat.

Leaning back against the railing, I watch silently as Mom sits there sobbing uncontrollably. Though I make no attempt to offer comfort, I can't help feeling sorry for her. Few mothers could withstand the ruthless evisceration Maverick just served up cold on a platter.

When her sobs subside to an occasional hiccup, I ask quietly, "Are you okay?"

She sniffles pathetically and dabs at her streaming eyes with the sodden handkerchief. When I move to sit beside her, she reaches for my hand, grasping it like a lifeline.

"I'm sorry," she says in a cracked voice, uttering those words for the first time in my life. "I am so sorry, Gunner. For everything."

I say nothing, pulling my hand from her grip and turning away. Her face crumples.

"I don't hate you or your brother," she tearfully insists. "I could never hate my own flesh and blood. I was miserable with your father, but I never meant to take out my frustrations on you and Maverick. I never meant to hurt you—"

"But you did." My voice is hard. Cold. "I may not agree with Maverick's timing, but every word he said was true. I'm tired of pretending you weren't a shitty mother. You were manipulative and self-absorbed and cruel. There were many days we both wished to God we'd been born to someone else. Anyone but you."

She sucks in a breath, fresh tears spilling from her eyes.

I don't want to pile on, but I need to get some things off my chest. Now that Maverick got the ball rolling, I might as well say my peace.

Mom twists the sodden handkerchief in her lap. "I don't want to make excuses—"

"Then don't."

She stares at me with red-rimmed baby blues. "Your father put me through hell. I was wildly in love with him, and he turned that love into pure hatred. I know it's not fair, but every time I looked at you and your brother, all I saw was Dale. It didn't help that you both look so much like him," she mumbles resentfully. "It was hard not to feel like God was punishing me for not heeding my parents' warnings."

"So you punished us in retaliation," I say bitterly.

She doesn't deny it.

I just shake my head, leaning forward with my elbows resting on my knees and my hands clasped.

"Thank you for not telling anyone about my fling with Harlan." Her fingers tighten around the handkerchief. "If I had known what a vindictive little shit he was—"

"But that's the thing, Mom," I growl impatiently. "You *should* have known. Harlan went out of his way to make trouble for me and Mav. If you'd paid the slightest fucking bit of attention to us, you would've steered clear of that lowlife bastard."

"You're right. I was foolish. Willfully foolish. And it backfired spectacularly." She pauses, twisting the handkerchief into a tight knot. "Thank you for ... handling the situation."

"I don't want your thanks," I grumble. "You weren't supposed to find out."

"I'm glad Maverick told me. It was humiliating to hear, but I needed to know what you did for me." She reaches over to touch my arm. "I don't want you or your brother to hate me. What can I do to earn your forgiveness?"

I don't respond. I have no answers for her, not right now.

"I'll go to therapy," she promises. "I probably should've started seeing someone a long time ago, but I was too proud and stubborn, too embarrassed to admit my life wasn't perfect."

I'm quiet, staring down at my work-roughened hands.

"I'll make an appointment first thing Monday." She hesitates before adding quietly, "Maybe you and Maverick could join me sometime. Working through our issues together, as a family, might help the healing process."

I squeeze my eyes closed for a moment. Then I swallow hard and nod. "I can't speak for Maverick. But ... I'll keep an open mind."

"Thank you, baby," she whispers gratefully.

I nod tightly. She's never called me baby before. I'm struggling to absorb it.

"I should have been kinder to Marlowe. You've been miserable since the breakup, I see that now." She squeezes my hand, all guilty empathy. "If there's anything I can do—"

"There isn't." I get up and walk to the railing, keeping my back to her. "It's been a long day, and we both have a lot to digest. If it's all the same to you ..." I trail off pointedly.

She catches my meaning. "Of course. I don't want to overstay my welcome." She rises to her feet and takes a step toward me, then thinks better of it.

I wait for her to speak, every nerve tense.

"You may find this hard to believe," she says softly, "but I want you and Maverick to be happy. *Truly* happy. A fairytale ending was never in the cards for your father and me. But Marlowe is clearly the one you're meant to be with, and I hope you can get her back ... before it's too late."

I say nothing, working hard not to grind my teeth.

Mom slips quietly away, leaving me to grapple with the harsh reality of spending the rest of my life without the love of

my life.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



MARLOWE

DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER, I go for a run after class. It's been an appallingly long time. Between work, school and nursing a broken heart, I haven't had the motivation or energy to exercise.

I push myself to run three miles, puffing and panting my way down every path. By the time I drag my winded ass back home, my tank top and yoga pants are soaked through with sweat.

When I see the black luxury sedan parked in front of my building, my heart kicks into another full sprint. Then I get pissed. Of course he'd show up today, of all days, when I look a hot sweaty mess. Bastard.

Flicking my damp ponytail over my shoulder, I march toward the front entrance as Gunner steps out of the car. He's dressed in a black sweater and black jeans with black boots, and I hate him for looking like a total badass.

"Hey." He stares at me uncertainly. "Can we talk?"

"Go fuck yourself," I say without breaking stride.

He steps forward, blocking my path.

"Get out of my way," I snarl.

He doesn't budge, his blue eyes looking straight into mine. "I miss you," he says softly. "I'm losing my mind without you."

“That sounds like a *you* problem.”

He slowly looks me over, frowning. “You’ve lost weight. Have you been starving yourself?”

“Fuck. You.”

The look he gives me is so miserable it stalls my breath. But I grit my teeth and stand my ground.

He moves closer, invading my personal space. “I just want to talk—”

“Oh, now you want to talk? It’s been five weeks, Gunner. Five fucking weeks without a single call or text—”

“You think I haven’t wanted to talk to you? To hear your voice? I’ve thought about calling you every fucking day, but I didn’t know what to say or where to even begin. And I assumed you’d probably blocked my number.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” I pull out my phone and scroll through my contacts until I find his name under his picture. After a few angry taps, I hold up the phone to his face. “There. Now you’re blocked *and* deleted.”

He curses and rakes a hand through his hair, the familiar gesture pricking my heart.

“I’m sorry,” he says roughly, and I can hear his pain. “I shouldn’t have said all those things to you. I shouldn’t have lied about Brynn—”

“Save your breath. I don’t care anymore.” When I try to sidestep him, his big body gets in my way again.

“Can we go inside and talk? Please?”

I glare up at him. “Let me go, Gunner. I’m serious.”

“So am I.” He looms over me, asserting his dominance like the alphahole he is. “Just let me take you to dinner—”

“Not interested.” I plant my hands on his chest and shove hard.

He steps back, just barely, a muscle popping on the side of his jaw. “Mar—”

“Stay the fuck out of my life.” I push past him and run into the building, tears burning my eyes every step of the way.

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN HE WOULDN'T give up so easily.

Two days later, I'm working through my lunch break when my phone buzzes on my desk. I don't recognize the number, but the text message grabs me by the throat: **I can't stop thinking about you.**

I toss the phone down as if I've been burned. Five seconds later, I snatch it up again and fire off a reply: **I told you to leave me alone.**

His response is immediate: **Look outside.**

I swivel my chair around to look out my office window. My eyes widen when I see a plane flying a banner that reads: *I'm truly sorry, Marlowe. Please forgive me.*

My foolish heart twists in my chest.

Through the glass wall, I can see my coworkers crowded around the window, pointing and whispering excitedly. Lilith stands in her office doorway, watching me with knowing sympathy.

I turn away from the window and take a deep breath, marshaling my defenses before typing into my phone: **I spent my whole life being mistreated by my mother, for reasons I never knew. I won't accept the same cruelty from the man I love—a man who can't even bring himself to say those three magic words. No matter how many gimmicks you try, or how many different phone numbers you use, I'm not talking to you. So save yourself the trouble and stop contacting me.**

I hit send and block his new number, my jaw set with resolve.

Ignoring the prying stares of my coworkers, I calmly make my way to the restroom, lock myself in a stall and spend the next twenty minutes silently bawling my eyes out.

Chapter Forty



GUNNER

“W ONDERFUL SPEECH, MR. RANSOM. SO INSPIRING.”

“Thank you, Ms. Duffy,” I say to the perky middle-aged blonde pumping my hand. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I’m not the only one,” she gushes. “You had the whole audience hanging on your every word. Any man who can keep a bunch of teenagers off TikTok for more than ten minutes has my total respect. And *what* an amazing turnout. You must be so pleased.”

“Of course,” I murmur, my gaze skimming over the lingering crowd.

Hundreds of community leaders, corporate donors, students and families attended tonight’s scholarship awards ceremony. The Ransom Global Foundation hosts the annual event to celebrate high school seniors interested in tech careers. I always look forward to the special evening, and it hurts like hell not having Marlowe here beside me.

“We can’t thank you enough for your generosity,” Ms. Duffy gushes some more, wrapping an arm around her biracial son’s shoulders. “Zachary was sooo excited to win the Young Innovator Award.”

“He earned it,” I say warmly. “He’s bright and talented, works hard and enjoys helping others. We’re confident he’ll thrive in our internship program next summer.”

Mother and son beam at my praise.

“I’d definitely love to work for Pantheon one day,” Zachary enthuses. “You guys have some of the coolest apps out there, plus you’re the best CEO.”

“Well played,” I tease, ruffling his curly black hair.

My brother joins us, drawing Ms. Duffy’s attention. While they chat, I sling an arm around Zachary’s shoulders and murmur in his ear, “You need to rethink some of your extracurricular activities. Hacking, specifically.”

His eyes bug out. “H-How did you—”

“I have eyes everywhere.”

He gulps nervously. “I ... I just—”

“Believe me, I understand the impulse. But you’re leaving too many crumbs, kiddo, and I don’t want you getting caught before I’ve had a chance to unlock your full potential.” I wink at him. “Lay low for a while. Enjoy your senior year, go to prom. Then get ready for an unforgettable internship where you’ll learn from the best. Deal?”

He smiles. “Deal.”

“Attaboy,” I say, ruffling his hair again.

His mother touches my arm. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but I thought your banner last week was so romantic. I hope it worked on your girlfriend. But if not—”

“*Mom,*” Zachary groans, doing a facepalm. “Can you just chill for once?”

She laughs, batting her lashes at me and Maverick.

“Let’s go.” Zachary throws us an apologetic look before steering his mother away.

Maverick grins beside me. “Even though she was a little too chatty for my taste, there’s just something irresistible about lonely divorcées—”

“Don’t even think about it,” I warn.

He laughs before we’re swarmed by more people.

An hour later, we're back in the car and heading away from downtown. Maverick pours a glass of whiskey from the minibar and offers it to me.

"No, thanks."

His eyebrow lifts. "Still abstaining?"

I nod, unknotting my tie.

He murmurs something into his glass before taking a sip.

"For the record," I grumble, "it wasn't necessary for you to ride with me tonight. You could've brought a plus one."

"And have you looking like a sad sack all night?" Maverick snorts. "No way."

"I wouldn't have fallen apart if you came with a date. I'm not *that* pathetic."

He gives me a look that says we both know better.

Scowling, I pull out my phone to doomscroll through newsfeeds, but not even the grimmest headlines can distract me from thoughts of Marlowe.

She's always in my head, even though she hates my guts. If I weren't such a selfish bastard, I'd let her move on. She's better off without me.

But I'm nothing without her. So I have to find a way to get her back.

"I'm thinking about buying her a piano," I mumble, half to myself. "I checked out the floor plan of her new apartment, and I think a baby grand could fit in her living room."

"So you didn't learn your lesson from banner-gate?" Maverick chuckles grimly when I scowl. "Sorry, Gunn, but I told you a woman like Marlowe needs more than grand gestures."

"For your information, she loves my so-called grand gestures." Or at least she used to. Before I screwed everything up and lost her.

Maverick sighs. “Look, I’m not gonna lie. Flying an entire orchestra to Hawaii was pretty damn epic. You did things for Marlowe you never even *considered* doing for Laurene—or anyone else for that matter. But as much as she might’ve enjoyed the perks of dating a romantic billionaire, I’m betting what she wants most from you is honesty. Transparency. She wants to know how you’re hardwired. She wants to crack your code.” His voice softens. “Above all else, Gunn, she wants your heart.”

My jaw clenches, eyes narrowing on my brother’s face.

“No, I haven’t been secretly talking to her. She just happens to have more depth than any woman you’ve ever dated.” Maverick chuckles, shaking his head at me. “Before you drop eighty grand on a piano she might set on fire, think long and hard about what I said.”

I put my head back against the seat, mulling over his words. I’d give up my fortune for just one more shot with Marlowe. But she made it painfully clear she’s done with me, and it’s tearing me apart.

As we near the exit for her apartment, it takes all my willpower not to tell Trace to get off. I’m so desperate for a glimpse of her that I’ve seriously considered sitting outside her building and watching her windows. Losing her has awakened my inner stalker, apparently.

Frowning at the thought, I jerk my tie free of my collar and ball it up in my fist. I could use a drink right about now to take the edge off, but that’s not an option. It can’t be.

“You’re not Dad,” Maverick says tautly, as if reading my mind. “I don’t care what kind of bullshit programming you internalized as a kid. You’re *not* Dale Ransom.”

I don’t respond for a long time, simply staring straight ahead while Maverick sips his whiskey, waiting.

“Remember when I went to that tech conference in Munich?” I finally say, my voice low. “It was the day after I broke up with Marlowe, and I was a complete fucking wreck. My first night in town, I got totally wasted and passed out in

my hotel room. The next morning, I woke up facedown in my own vomit. I was so out of it I couldn't even make it to the opening session to deliver the keynote address. Veronica covered my ass, telling everyone I had food poisoning. But she was so disappointed in me, she could barely look at me for days." My insides burn with renewed shame. "It was one of the lowest moments of my professional life. That's when I knew I had to make some changes."

"So you went cold turkey?"

I nod tightly. "I'm not saying I'll never touch another drink. But I need to take a break. I need to know I'm not using alcohol as a crutch. I need to know it doesn't control me. I need ..." My voice trails off, hand clenching on my thigh.

"You need to know you're not an alcoholic," Maverick finishes for me.

I swallow hard and nod, gritting my teeth. "It's not just the drinking. The half billion I cost our company? That wasn't just a careless mistake. I made a dangerous, reckless gamble because I was feeling invincible, point blank." I glare challengingly at Maverick. "So tell me again how I'm nothing like Dad."

He stares at me for a long moment, then reaches over and puts his hand on my shoulder.

"You're not him," he quietly reiterates. "But it doesn't matter how hard I try to convince you. Until you believe it yourself, you're going to be stuck in an endless loop of guilt and misery. You deserve better than that, Gunner. And so does Marlowe. So do whatever it takes to get yourself right. Then for fuck's sake, man, go get your girl back."

Chapter Forty-One



MARLOWE

HALFWAY THROUGH DECEMBER, LILITH HOSTS A holiday cocktail party at her house on the lake. The home resembles an art gallery with glossy hardwood floors, long hallways and bold abstract paintings that take up entire walls.

She's a gracious and elegant hostess, escorting me around the room and introducing me to her guests. They're mostly painters, musicians, writers and poets, along with members of our organization that I haven't already met through work.

Standing beside her in my little black dress and skyscraper heels, I smile and blush profusely as she brags about me and my achievements, waxing eloquent about my contributions to the Halifax Music Society.

"Among her many talents, Marlowe is also an accomplished pianist," she proudly announces to an attentive group of local music powerbrokers. "Although she prefers the administrative side of music, she's certainly gifted enough to enthrall audiences with her virtuosity. Perhaps she'll grace us with a song later this evening."

A murmur of approval goes around the circle. The president of a prestigious chamber ensemble hands me his card and tells me to contact him when I finish grad school.

I beam at him, my excitement barely contained. Working as an ensemble librarian would be an absolute dream come true.

As Lilith steers me away a few minutes later, she gives me a warm squeeze around my waist and crows, “I knew you’d be a big hit tonight.”

“Thank you for everything,” I tell her earnestly. “You’ve been such a godsend.”

“Oh, Marlowe.” She hugs me to her side, tipping our heads together. “You deserve all the good things life has to offer. Besides, us smart gals have to stick together.”

I grin at her. “Would you excuse me for a minute? I’m going to do a little happy dance in the restroom.”

She laughs, releasing me. “Take your time.”

I head for the powder room, wending my way through dozens of people milling around with cocktails and hors d’oeuvres, chatting and enjoying the eclectic range of music.

After emptying my bladder, I wash my hands and reapply the red matte lipstick my mother sent me with a slew of other beauty products. She’s been doing everything in her power to atone for years of treating me like dirt. It’ll take more than expensive gifts, of course. But she’s trying her best, and I appreciate that.

Finger-combing my hair, I stare hard at my reflection in the mirror. My face is thinner, my cheekbones more pronounced than they were when I first moved to Texas. So much has changed since then, and some days I feel like a completely different person: older, wiser and far more jaded. I no longer believe in fairytales. I learned the hard way that they don’t exist, and Prince Charming is just an asshole with great hair, big muscles and a monster dick.

Shaking off the cynical thoughts, I leave the powder room and head back to the party that seems to be getting louder as more guests arrive.

Helping myself to a caramel apple martini from a passing waiter’s tray, I cross the room to the terrace doors and slip outside for some fresh air.

Austin is in the grip of a cold snap that’s kept most of the guests indoors. Being from Pittsburgh, I’m used to freezing

temperatures and snowstorms. So a little chilly air doesn't chase me back inside.

A few other brave souls are huddled together smoking cigarettes and laughing quietly.

Sipping my martini, I walk to the stone balcony and look up at the night sky. I'm standing there counting stars when I hear the terrace door open, followed by the low murmur of two voices. One belongs to Lilith.

My heart rate spikes. Because I recognize the second voice. Know it like my own.

When I turn around and see Gunner, my stomach flips hard enough to make me gasp.

As our gazes lock across the terrace, Lilith smiles softly and slips back inside.

My grip on my martini glass turns clammy as Gunner walks slowly toward me with his long coat flapping in the breeze, black hair gleaming in the moonlight.

Goose bumps erupt across my skin and I shiver, unable to look away as he closes the distance between us.

His dark blue eyes are as mesmerizing as ever, pinning me to the spot as he stands before me with his hands tucked in his pockets.

I try to appear cool, aloof. Totally unbothered. "Gunner."

"Marlowe." His voice is a quiet rumble I feel in the pit of my stomach. "It's good to see you."

I nod mutely, trying to swallow around the huge knot in my throat. I hope he can't detect how fast my heart is beating or how hard it is to breathe with him standing so damn close.

"I didn't know Lilith invited you."

"She didn't. I invited myself."

Another shiver runs through me that has nothing to do with the cold. I lift my glass to my lips, staring at him as I sip.

He's wearing an expensive dark gray overcoat. It hangs open to reveal a killer navy suit that emphasizes his tall, powerful body. He's let his hair grow well past his collar and over his ears, the night breeze ruffling the thick strands.

God, he looks fucking amazing. Despite the way he stomped on my heart and sent me packing, my insane desire for him hasn't gone anywhere.

He towers over me, his eyes drinking in my features. His delicious scent, so achingly familiar, teases my nostrils. It's everything I can do not to breathe him in.

"Why are you here?" I demand unsteadily. "What do you want?"

"You." He takes a step closer. "I want you."

My knees knock together and my heart pounds hard enough to crack a rib. I want to throw myself into his arms and hold on forever. But he forfeited that privilege when he unceremoniously dumped me.

So I toss back the rest of my martini and set the glass down on the stone balustrade, then spin on my heel and march off.

He comes after me, following me into the house and pushing through the throng of partygoers. I can hear people trying to talk to him, but he brushes them off.

"Marlowe, wait. Please." He pursues me across the crowded room, down a flight of stairs and back outside onto the lower terrace. Before I can run down the steps leading to the lake, he grabs my arm and whirls me around.

I almost slap him, swear to God. But we're not quite alone and I don't want to cause even more of a scene than we probably already have.

So I snatch my arm out of his grip and back away, fighting the hot burn of tears.

"I'm sorry." His gaze locks with mine, his face ravaged with guilt. "I know you're still hurting—"

"Fuck you," I hiss.

He winces.

As a few more people trickle outside, a song drifts through the open doors. “All To You” by Russ. I used to love that song. Now every time I hear it, I’m going to remember this damn moment on this moonswept terrace.

“I know you told me to leave you alone—”

“Yet here you are.”

He nods. “I wanted to see if you’re ready to—”

“How’s Gianna?” I jeer, crossing my arms over my chest.

He frowns. “She’s ... fine, I guess. Why?”

“I saw a picture of you with her. You clearly wasted no time going out—”

“Once.” He holds up a single finger. “We went out *one* time, and only because she insisted on treating me to dinner as repayment for my help. Nothing happened between us.” At my disbelieving look, he calmly reasons, “If we were an item, wouldn’t you have seen more pictures of us by now?”

“Not necessarily,” I shoot back. “The first time I googled you, I didn’t see any pictures of you with Laurene, and *she* was your fiancée.”

He inclines his head, conceding my point. “I have an insider at the company who curates image search results to protect my privacy. Just because I’m a public figure doesn’t mean my personal life is for public consumption. A few pictures might slip through the cracks every now and then. But there aren’t any more photos of me and Gianna because we’re not dating.”

I shake my head slowly at him. “You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“Generally.” One side of his mouth kicks up. “I’m a genius, remember?”

I don’t want to smile, nor do I want to be disarmed by one of *his* smiles. I’m having a hard enough time resisting him as it is.

“I saw the way you laughed with Gianna at her show,” I grumble. “You’re attracted to her.”

“Not even remotely.”

“Why not? She looks like a supermodel.”

“She’s a child.”

“I’m not much older—”

“And you’re more woman than she’ll ever be.”

My legs wobble, his husky words playing havoc with my emotions. “What about the artbook?” I blurt out, grasping at the first thing that pops into my mind.

He tilts his head, eyes narrowed. “The artbook?”

“The one you were looking at that day in the library. The one autographed by Willem de Kooning. The one you gave to Gianna.”

“I didn’t give the book to her. I gave it to a friend whose autistic son wants to become a painter.” His eyes glint at me. “I can do this all night, sweetheart. But frankly, we have more important things to talk about.”

My heart skips three beats, then pounds frantically as he moves closer.

“There’s no one else, Marlowe. It’s you I’m absolutely crazy about. I have been from the very start.”

“You sure had a funny way of showing it,” I say bitterly. “You kicked me out—”

“Because I was terrified, and a fucking coward.” His voice catches in his throat and he swallows tightly before averting his gaze toward the night sky. “For so many years I’ve lived in abject fear of repeating my father’s mistakes, of being just like him. That’s what had always been drilled into me, and I believed it wholeheartedly.”

His eyes return to me, stormy and vulnerable. “When I met you, I felt a connection I never expected to feel with any woman. For the first time in my life, everything about us felt *right*. As our relationship evolved, I kept telling myself you

were too good to be true, but I had to be with you. I couldn't stay away. I kept things from you because I didn't want to lose you and I was afraid of not measuring up, of not being the man you need and deserve. But every time you called me on my bullshit, I realized I was failing you, just like I always feared I would. In the end, I decided to let you go before I hurt you any further." He pauses, swallowing hard. "If I'm being honest, I was also afraid you'd get sick of me and leave—"

"So you beat me to it? Hurt me before I could hurt you?"

At the guilty flicker in his eyes, I turn away and try to blink back my gathering tears, but they keep coming.

"I could stand here and talk about childhood trauma. About being the product of an alcoholic father and an emotionally abusive mother. I could tell you they fucked me up, and all of that would be true." His voice drops an octave. "But my parents aren't the ones who broke your heart. That was me. And there aren't enough words in the universe to tell you how truly sorry I am."

I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting every urge to give in, to accept his apology, to trust him with my heart again.

"Look at me."

I shake my head.

He puts his fingers under my chin and turns my face, but I stubbornly refuse to meet his gaze.

"Tell me you're happier without me," he roughly commands. "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me anymore."

I swallow painfully. "Gunner—"

"Tell me."

I force myself to look up into his face, hating the slight tremor in my chin.

His glittering eyes hold mine, daring me to lie to him.

I open my mouth, but I can't say the words.

"That's what I thought," he whispers.

I take an angry step back, my body shivering in the chilled air that springs up between us. “You shouldn’t have come here tonight.”

He steps forward, deliberately closing the space I created. “Give me another chance.”

“Why should I?” I choke out tearfully. “You hurt me, Gunner. You tossed me out in the cold like a worthless piece of property you no longer wanted or needed!”

“And I’ve regretted it every single second since you left.” His eyes are anguished, his hands now gripping my upper arms. “I can’t fucking live without you, Marlowe. Please take me back. I’m begging you. *Please.*”

I shake my head, swatting at my tears. “It’s too late, Gunner. I’ve moved on.”

“Have you?” He catches my hair in his hands and tilts my head back to gaze into my face, his eyes burning with intensity. “I can’t stop thinking about you. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. I can’t concentrate at work. I constantly wonder where you are and what you’re doing. The house isn’t the same without you. *I’m* not the same without you. I miss laughing with you. I miss the way you pronounce certain words, like *dahntahn* instead of downtown. I miss the angelic sounds of your piano playing. I miss fighting and fucking and talking until the sun comes up. I miss having you in my life.”

“Oh God.” A thick layer of tears blurs my vision as his words burn into my heart and brand themselves against my skin. “You can’t do this to me, Gunner. It’s not fair—”

“I love you. I’ve loved you from the moment we locked eyes across that ridiculously named bar. When you sat down at my table, I felt like the luckiest man in the whole damn world. You were the most mesmerizing woman I’d ever met, and I wanted to know everything about you. After that night, I couldn’t get you off my mind, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that if I never saw you again, my life would’ve been worse for it.” His voice thickens, betraying some of his desperation. “I love you so damn much, Marlowe. Come home to me. Please, baby, just come home.”

Oh God!

He kisses my neck, my cheek, my hair, rubbing his forehead against mine as he pleads raggedly, “Say you forgive me. Say you’ll give me a second chance.”

He’s laying his heart bare, holding nothing back for the first time ever. As I look into his eyes, I see real love and a raw vulnerability that squeezes my heart. I can’t live without him either. It’s pointless to even try.

“I love you,” I finally surrender, the words resonating deep in my soul.

His face softens with relief. “You still love me?”

“Yes, God help me, I do.”

The words are barely out of my mouth before he lifts me off my feet and spins me around. I laugh through my tears and wrap my arms around his neck as joy bursts inside me, spilling over like effervescent champagne bubbles.

He swings me around again before hugging me against his body, one big hand cupping the back of my head as he whispers into my hair, “I’ve missed you so damn much!”

“I’ve missed you, too!”

He sets me on my feet before his lips swoop down on mine, stealing my breath. He kisses me with all of the fierce longing and emotion that’s built up over the past eighty-one days, and I kiss him back with matching intensity.

He breaks the kiss and stares down at me, framing my face in his hands. “I know you’re in the middle of a party, but I’m dying to be alone with you. Can we get the fuck out of here?”

“Yes, please,” I say with a breathless laugh.

As he grabs my hand and strides from the terrace, I see the flash of several camera phones. He leads me back inside and through the crowd, a blur of smiling faces.

Lilith stands by the front door with my coat and the beaded clutch I must have left somewhere at some point. She’s smiling at us, her eyes shining with approval.

As Gunner helps me into my coat, his fingertips brush against the bare skin of my back, sending a rush of tingles through me.

I glance over my shoulder at him, my lower lip caught between my teeth.

Raw hunger flares in his eyes.

Lilith chuckles knowingly. “Off you go, young lovers.”

IT’S A DAMN GOOD THING GUNNER lives close to my boss, or we might not have made it home fully clothed.

When he roars up to the house in his Lambo and jumps out, I don’t even wait for him to open my door.

We stumble up the front steps together, lips and tongues tangling, stroking each other’s faces and raking hands through each other’s hair.

He unlocks the front door, rasping out between kisses that we have the place to ourselves tonight. The words alone send my body up in flames.

He backs me across the threshold and kicks the door closed behind us. Tossing my clutch in the vicinity of a table, I watch his eyes flick up to the second floor as he calculates the distance to his bedroom and decides it’s too far. With an aggressive suck on my bottom lip, he reaches under my short dress and rips off my panties.

Gasping with pleasure, I unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants, shoving them halfway down his thighs before he picks me up. I wrap my legs around his waist as he pins me against the nearest wall. Hands gripping my outer thighs, he slams inside me with a brutal thrust of his hips.

I scream his name, clenching slickly around his hard cock. He groans and starts thrusting into me, each ferocious stroke sending a river of lava through my blood. I grab handfuls of his hair and lock my ankles behind his back, my spiked heels digging into his ass like spurs.

He pounds me against the wall, so deep and so fucking good. I moan with every thrust, absolutely delirious at the feel

of him inside me after weeks of deprivation. He takes what he needs, and I surrender everything I have.

We climax hard and fast, my ecstatic cry echoing his deeper one. My head falls back against the wall, my pussy sucking at his cock as hot cum floods me. He keeps thrusting through our release, growling roughly as his hips ram into mine, making my whole body spasm uncontrollably in another orgasm.

Dazed and trembling, I close my eyes and slump against him, my head falling onto his shoulder. He finally collapses against me with a raspy groan, burying his face in the side of my neck. We hold each other tight, our ragged breaths filling the foyer. We never even bothered to remove our coats.

Contented minutes pass before Gunner kisses my neck and whispers in my ear, “Now that we’ve taken the edge off ...”

I let out a breathless laugh as he lifts me into his arms, cradling me against his chest as he heads for his bedroom, bounding up the stairs two at a time.

In the low lamplight by the bed, we undress each other tenderly, kissing and caressing after each piece of clothing is removed. When we’re skin to skin, Gunner picks me up and tumbles me down onto the mattress, his body landing on top of mine. I wrap my legs around his waist, sighing with pleasure when he captures my lips and twines our fingers together above my head.

His first thrust makes me cry out against his mouth, my hips lifting to take him even deeper. He groans my name, his voice hoarse and achingly raw. Fingers tightening around mine, he starts pumping in and out of me. I close my eyes on a breathless moan, my head thrown back in ecstasy.

We make love desperately, lost in feelings made all the more explosive by the fierce connection we share. He bellows my name when he comes, his body stiffening against mine as he takes me right over the edge with him. The powerful orgasms leave us both trembling, our hearts bursting with love and euphoria.

He stays inside me for a wondrously long time, his cock twitching as he brushes openmouthed kisses over my lips, my jaw and neck, the upper swells of my breasts and then back to my lips, smiling at my shivery sigh.

“God, I missed you,” he whispers.

“I missed you too, baby.” I smile, nibbling his bottom lip. “I almost forgot how heavy you are.”

A rough huff of a laugh rumbles out of his chest. “There’s the smartass I know and love.”

I laugh. “No, no, don’t get off,” I protest, but he’s already lifting himself away, kissing the curve of my shoulder before slowly pulling out. The luscious friction of his retreating cock curls my toes.

He rolls onto his back and pulls me tight to him, his arm banded around my waist. I snuggle against his side, savoring the sense of completion that infuses every cell in my body when I’m with him. It’s been way too long.

As he buries his lips in my hair, I say softly, “I missed hearing you call me that.”

“What?”

“Smartass.” I smile. “And kitten. It depressed me to think of you calling anyone else those names.”

He kisses the crown of my head. “You’re my one and only smartass, kitten. There could never be another.”

I melt into a puddle as if he just recited the most epically romantic poem from Baudelaire.

When a strong gust of wind blows against the windows, he pulls the covers up to our waists, cocooning us in his huge bed. I feel deliciously warm and cozy, safe and protected.

“I didn’t think it could get this cold in Austin.”

“It happens,” Gunner murmurs lazily. “Sometimes we even get snow in January. Not much, but enough to cause a stir.”

“Wow,” I say, smiling and nuzzling his chest. “Can’t wait to cozy up in front of a fire on one of those cold winter

nights.”

“Mmm. Sounds like heaven.” He threads his hand through my hair, gently massaging my scalp with his fingertips. I purr in bliss, making him chuckle.

“You’ve just given me another reason to call you kitten.”

“What made you start in the first place?”

“It was the way you told me off and slapped me the night we met. Such a gorgeous little spitfire with sharp claws,” he says, chuckling fondly. “I was lucky to escape with my eyeballs intact.”

“Your *balls*, you mean,” I retort dryly.

He laughs. “Those, too.”

I grin and snuggle closer, gazing around the bedroom. “It’s so good to be back here again. I’ve missed this place so much.”

“The feeling is definitely mutual. Which reminds me, Mrs. Calder really misses Sansa. She wants her to come back home.”

“And what about you?” I tease, tipping my head back to grin at him. “Do *you* miss Sansa?”

He grunts, looking embarrassed. “Maybe.”

I laugh. “You totally do.”

He rolls his eyes, and I laugh harder.

He tries not to grin. “I got used to having her around.”

“I know you did.” I nip at his jaw, smiling. “Sansa will be overjoyed to move back. She hasn’t been the same since we left. We made quite the pair, two miserable peas in a pod.”

“Plenty of that going around. Speaking of misery,” Gunner grumbles, “I’m glad things didn’t work out with that drummer.”

I give him a surprised look. “How did you ... ?”

“I saw a picture of you with him, backstage after a concert.” He angles back so he can see my face. “Were you

dating him?”

“Not really. I mean, I went out with him a couple times because I was lonely and depressed. He was cool, but I didn’t feel any sparks. I just ...” I trail off, shaking my head at Gunner. “You’ve ruined me for anyone else.”

His expression softens. “We’ve ruined each other.”

I smile at him, and he smiles back.

“We have so much catching up to do,” I say quietly. “There are so many things I want to share with you. And I want to know everything I’ve missed in your world.”

“We can stay up all night and talk all day tomorrow. Like you said, we need to make up for lost time.” He runs his fingertips down my back, leaving a trail of tingles on my skin. “Dad bought a horse ranch outside town.”

“Really? A horse ranch?”

“Apparently it was a childhood dream.” Gunner smiles. “I’ll take you there on Sunday. Dad and Mrs. Calder will be thrilled to see you. We can go horseback riding with them and stay for dinner.”

“Sounds wonderful. Can’t wait.” I grin at him hopefully. “Do you think they’ll get married someday?”

“They will if Dad has anything to say about it.”

“God, that’s so sweet,” I say with a sigh. “I’m so happy for them. I hope everything works out.”

“Me, too.” Gunner gazes down at me, caressing the length of my hair. “I love you so much, sweetheart. Now that I have you back, I’m never letting you go again.”

“Good,” I say softly, “because I don’t want you to let me go. Ever.”

He rolls me over so I’m lying under him, his hips pressed to mine as he takes my mouth in a deep, hungry kiss. I melt right into him, wrapping my arms around his neck and hooking a leg around his thigh.

He drinks me in, licks me slowly and tugs my bottom lip between his teeth. When I moan into his mouth, he gives me a sexy little smile, and I smile back.

We shut out the world for the rest of the night, caught up in the fervency of our reunion. As we drift off to sleep around dawn, there's a dreamy smile on my face.

My family thought I was batshit crazy for moving to Texas on a whim, and sometimes even I had to question my own sanity. But little did any of us know that my destiny awaited me right here, safe and secure in Gunner Ransom's arms.

Chapter Forty-Two



MARLOWE

TWO WEEKS LATER, WE RETURN TO Kauai for a spontaneous getaway to celebrate New Year's Eve.

Winter is the rainy season, so it showers most of our first day on the island. This gives us the perfect excuse to stay in bed cuddling and making love to the sound of falling rain from the open balcony doors.

When morning dawns bright and clear, we grab our snorkeling masks and flippers and set off for Poipu Beach on the South Shore. We hold hands underwater, sharing grins as we explore the breathtaking world of tropical fish and sea turtles.

After snorkeling for a few hours, we shower and change and have lunch at a cozy little spot encircled by jagged cliffs. Afterward we take a helicopter back to Gunner's property on the North Shore.

During the ride, I ooh and aah over the spectacular aerial views of the Na Pali Coast, Waimea Canyon and the crater of Mount Wai'ale'ale. I feel like a giddy little kid, turning excitedly toward Gunner and pointing out the window. He smiles tenderly and kisses my shoulder, enjoying my pleasure more than the scenery porn.

"I'm so glad we came back here," I say as the helicopter dips over the sea and heads toward his cliff-top estate. "Our

first trip was totally amazing, but three days isn't nearly enough time to see and do everything."

"That was my thinking," he murmurs against my skin. "Have I told you how fucking happy I am to have you all to myself for the next eight days?"

"You may have mentioned it once or twice." I grin at him. "And ditto."

A few minutes later, the helicopter lands on the cliff and our pilot opens the door. Gunner climbs down and lifts me out, kissing the tip of my nose before lowering me to the ground.

As the helicopter lifts off, I fling my arms out and twirl in circles, laughing as the wind from the whirring blades tosses my hair around and whips my white gauze dress against my body.

"God, I love this island," I gush breathlessly. "All those waterfalls crashing down those cliffs. Aren't they the most beautiful things you've ever seen?"

"Hmm. Not quite."

I stop mid-twirl to look at Gunner. He's standing there watching me with his hands tucked in the pockets of his khaki pants, the wind molding his white linen shirt to his muscled chest.

As I stare at him, he moves in close and tips my chin up, locking his gaze with mine. "*You're* the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Nothing else even comes close."

I melt. Freaking *melt*.

He takes my hand and brings it to his lips, staring into my eyes as he kisses my fingers one by one. "You never wear much jewelry," he observes softly. "No bracelets. No rings. You don't like pretty, shiny things?"

"I do," I say, smiling. "I just ... well, it's never been a big deal. Though I definitely love those diamond earrings you gave me the last time we were here."

His eyes glimmer. "Maybe I should start a tradition."

“I ... holy shit,” I breathe when he reaches inside his pocket and withdraws a little black velvet box. Instantly my eyes start welling up with tears. “Gunner ...”

“I had no idea I needed you in my life until the night I met you. But it was right here, standing in this very same spot watching you twirl around, that I finally admitted to myself how I really felt about you. You turned my world upside down and made me a better man, and I’d give anything to have you for my wife.” Without taking his eyes off my face, he drops smoothly to one knee and thumbs the box open. “I love you, Marlowe Somerset. Will you marry me?”

“Oh, my God, Gunner ...” I stare at him through my tears, my heart pounding with hope and joy, no fear or doubts whatsoever. But I hear myself whisper, “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my entire life.”

I beam. “Then *hell yes*, I’ll marry you.”

He grins the biggest grin and slides the biggest rock on my finger. The huge square diamond could have been mined from the depths of a nearby volcano. It sparkles brilliantly in the sunlight and takes my breath away.

When Gunner stands up, I throw my arms around his neck. I’m laughing and crying, tears streaming down my face as he literally sweeps me off my feet and crushes me to his chest. This just might be the most romantic moment of my life, one of many unforgettable moments this man has already given me.

When his mouth slants over mine, I can feel the strength of his love, and I soak up every bit of it.

Loud cheers pull us out of our little world.

Turning toward the sound, my jaw drops at the sight of my mother, sister, aunt Nora, Lilith, Quinn and Valeria walking across the lawn. They’re accompanied by Gunner’s family members, his friends and their plus ones, his assistant and the senior executive team, along with Mrs. Calder, Mr. Leland and Trace.

“No freaking way!” I squeal, clapping both hands over my mouth.

Gunner chuckles warmly and whispers in my ear, “Surprise.”

I laugh as the crowd swells forward to congratulate us. The next several minutes are a blur of smiling faces, tearful hugs and exuberant handshakes.

I’m introduced to both sets of Gunner’s grandparents, who are as different as night and day. The Ransoms are a salt-of-the-earth couple in matching Hawaiian shirts, Bermuda shorts and sandals. They compliment my hair and call me a pretty little thing who looks “nice and fertile,” drawing a mortified gasp from Gunner’s mother.

Her parents, in stark contrast, have the refined bearing of old Southern blue bloods, and I’m not entirely convinced that they approve of me. But Gunner must have warned them to behave, because they smile kindly enough and welcome me to the family.

At some point, Gunner is drawn into conversation with his dad and both grandfathers. Seizing the opportunity, my mother pulls me aside with Aunt Nora, Ember, Quinn and Valeria.

I can’t remember the last time I saw her so happy. She gives me another fierce hug and whispers in my ear, “Your father would be so proud of you. And he definitely would’ve loved Gunner.” She draws away and cups my cheek, a sentimental smile softening her face. “I’m so happy for you two. You really *are* perfect for each other.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I give her a watery smile. “I’m glad you’re here to celebrate with us.”

“Wild horses couldn’t have kept me away. When Gunner called to tell us his plans, my suitcase was packed before I even hung up the phone.” Her expression turns humble. “I thanked him for allowing me to take part in your special day. After everything I’ve put you through, God knows I don’t deserve to be here.”

“Let’s not think about the past, Mom,” I say quietly. “Not today.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I just ... I just wanted you to know how grateful I am.”

I nod and smile.

She smiles back. “The rest of our family will be at the wedding, of course. I didn’t want to overwhelm you this weekend. That’s also why Gunner invited a limited number of his relatives. He has a big family on both sides, and he says they can be quite a handful.” Her eyes twinkle. “He’s so protective of you, darling. And you weren’t exaggerating about his romantic streak. *What* a proposal.”

“Totally swoonworthy.” Ember hugs me from behind and rests her chin on my shoulder. “I’m glad he finally came to his senses. I was giving him one more week before I flew down to Texas and kicked his ass.”

“Sure you were,” I tease.

We both laugh.

“Darling,” Mom sighs, looking around in awe. “This estate is simply breathtaking. When we arrived this morning, we were absolutely blown away.”

“Absolutely,” Aunt Nora and Ember confirm.

“Check out the size of that rock on her finger,” Quinn exclaims.

They make a big fuss over my diamond ring until Gunner joins us, and then they fawn over him until I don’t know whether to be embarrassed or amused.

The fawning is blessedly cut short when Gunner’s mother comes over to introduce me to her date. He’s attractive, deeply tanned and independently wealthy. He’s also ten years her junior. She likes younger men and there’s nothing wrong with that, as long as they treat her well and aren’t after her fortune.

“This is the special young lady who did what no one else ever has: won Gunner’s heart.” Tabitha gives me a meaningful smile and squeezes my hand.

I return her smile, gratefully accepting the peace offering.

By the time we get through the preliminary greetings and introductions, an army of caterers has almost finished setting up tables under a big white tent. Linen cloths, china, silverware, wineglasses, flowers. The works.

When I stare incredulously at Gunner, he gives me a lazy grin. “It’s our engagement party and New Year’s Eve bash rolled into one.”

I shake my head wonderingly at him. “I’ll never get enough of your surprises.”

“And I’ll never get enough of *you*,” he murmurs, kissing me softly. When cheers and whistles erupt around us, we laugh against each other’s mouths.

The party gets under way with a live band and circulating waiters serving cocktails and canapés. Gunner and I walk hand in hand through the crowd, laughing and socializing with our guests.

Sedonia—who brought Luca as her plus one—regales me with stories about her college days with Gunner and Maverick. She fondly refers to them as the craziest white boys she’s ever met, which makes her “crazy by proxy” for agreeing to join their company. When Gunner humorously threatens to fire her, she lets out a throaty laugh and tells me to call her if I ever need backup. We’re definitely going to be good friends.

Halfway across the lawn, Gunner’s other college buddies swarm us, joking and slapping him playfully on the back. When they wink at me and promise to keep his bachelor party PG-13, Gunner wastes no time leading me away, setting off a roar of raucous male laughter.

Swept up in the revelry, people flock to the dance floor. Gunner and I join them, gazing into each other’s eyes as we relive memories of the night we waltzed under the stars. Though the classical music has been replaced by pop tunes, we still get caught up in a sort of dreamy spell. We dance together like no one else is watching, holding each other close whether the song is fast or slow.

When it starts raining, we're the last ones to dash for cover under the large tent, laughing as we wipe water off each other's faces. We grin all the way through the five-course dinner and congratulatory toasts.

By the time dinner is over, the sun is setting and the rain has stopped. Twinkling lights and paper lanterns strung between the trees give the lawn a magical, romantic glow.

As the dancing and revelry resume, Gunner and I retreat into the shadows of a massive banyan tree, kissing and nuzzling and whispering sweet nothings to each other.

"Get a room, lovebirds."

Without lifting his mouth from mine, Gunner flips his brother off.

Maverick laughs. "Is that any way to greet your best man?"

"If he's intruding on a private moment," Gunner grumbles, "then yeah, it is."

I laugh and turn to smile at Maverick. "Enjoying yourself?"

"What's not to enjoy? Great party. Beautiful scenery. Momentous occasion." He tweaks my nose and claps Gunner on the shoulder, chuckling at his scowl. "Not to blow smoke up my own ass, but I deserve a lot of credit for bringing you lovebirds together. I mean, *I'm* the one who chose to meet for drinks at The Jaded Zombie that night. And if it weren't for my perpetual lateness, I would've been sitting at the table with you when Marlowe arrived. Which means she wouldn't have mistaken you for her date."

I grin at Gunner. "He has a point."

"He does," Gunner concedes.

Grinning harder, I stand on tiptoe and kiss Maverick's cheek. "Thank you, fairy godfather."

"Yeah. We owe you one." Gunner slings an arm around his brother's neck and loudly smooches his cheek, laughing when

Maverick groans and tries to squirm away. Their affectionate bond gets me every single time.

“That’s the last kiss you’ll ever get from my woman,” Gunner asserts, placing himself squarely between Maverick and me.

Grinning companionably, the three of us stand there watching the dancers and partygoers, several of whom have already had too much to drink.

Notably Quinn, who’s clutching a cocktail glass and gushing breathlessly to Trace. He’s nodding and sipping his drink, seemingly amused by her take-me-now smiles. She tends to get super flirty when she’s drunk, and despite having a boyfriend, she still drools over Trace every time she sees him. He’s in a relationship and he doesn’t strike me as the cheating type. But I’ve watched enough reality dating shows to know that anything can happen during a tropical island getaway.

My amused gaze drifts to where Ember sits with Lilith, Valeria and Veronica. She’s talking and laughing, the ocean breeze blowing her hair around her face like a golden halo.

Lilith took an instant liking to my sister. A little while ago, I overheard her telling Ember about all the blue chip law firms in Austin. She’s obviously trying to lure her away from Pittsburgh, an endeavor I wholeheartedly support.

As Gunner nuzzles my hair, I look toward the dance floor and break into a grin. My future father-in-law is showing off his moves, twirling Mrs. Calder under his arm and making her dress flare around her knees as she giggles like a schoolgirl.

“Dad’s gonna propose any day now,” Maverick predicts.

“Probably,” Gunner agrees.

A wistful sigh escapes me. “I couldn’t be more thrilled for them. But the house won’t be the same without Mrs. Calder, and I might have to give up custody of Sansa.” I brighten after a moment. “Maybe they could just live with us?”

Maverick snorts. “You wanna risk walking in on them fucking?”

“Jesus.” Gunner punches his brother’s shoulder and scowls. “Thanks for the visual, asshole.”

Maverick’s rumbling shout of laughter draws admiring stares from every woman within earshot. He’ll definitely have no shortage of bed partners this weekend.

He whispers something in Gunner’s ear that has him shaking his head in amused exasperation. He grins and playfully slaps Gunner on the back, then winks at me. “Save a dance for me later.”

“Like hell she will,” Gunner growls.

Maverick laughs devilishly and saunters off, leaving us alone again.

Leaning back against the banyan tree, Gunner pulls me against him with his arms encircling my waist and his chin resting on top of my head. We’re silent for a while, feeling the pounding surf below us as we enjoy the ukulele music coming from the stage.

“They’re good,” I say appreciatively. “Local band?”

“Yeah. David Kaponi recommended them. They’re indie.”

I nod, swaying to the infectious rhythm. “If I owned a record label, I’d sign them in a heartbeat.”

Gunner pushes my hair to one side and kisses the curve of my neck. “Maybe I should buy you a record label.”

I laugh. “Gotta keep diversifying that portfolio, huh?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Turning around, I loop my arms around his neck and press my breasts against his chest, wringing a soft groan from him. As residual beads of rainwater fall from the leaves above us, I open my mouth and catch a few drops to share with Gunner, moaning as our tongues dance wetly.

“So damn hot.” His voice is a rough rasp, his cock throbbing against my stomach.

I smile, nibbling his lips. “We’ve got a lot of celebrating to do, don’t we?”

“Hell, yes.” Eyes glinting rakishly, he skims a hand down my back and squeezes my ass, whispering in my ear, “You’re not getting any sleep tonight.”

Delicious heat floods my body as I whisper back, “What else is new?”

He grins and holds me tighter as a soft breeze blows through the branches of the banyan tree. I close my eyes with a blissful smile, wondering if it’s possible to die of happiness.

After a few minutes, I say quietly, “I was so moved by your father’s beautiful toast at dinner. He said the sweetest things.”

“He meant every word. He’s always been in your corner, Marlowe. He adores you, says you’re the daughter he never had.” Gunner’s lips brush my temple. “Do you want to get married here? Or somewhere else?”

“Are you kidding?” I say, lifting my head to stare at him. “This place is perfect, Gunner. It’s a tropical paradise, and it already holds so many special memories for us. I can’t think of a better place to start our new lives together.”

“I agree.” He touches my face, his gaze gentle. “I was thinking maybe you could walk down the aisle to your father’s song, ‘Blue Wish.’”

My heart swells with so much emotion that tears sting my eyes. “That’s a wonderful idea,” I whisper past the lump in my throat. “Thank you for thinking of that.”

He strokes my hair and smiles down at me, his eyes glowing with love and the promise of a million tomorrows.

As the evening stretches toward midnight, the servers pass out flutes of champagne. On the cusp of a new year, there’s a palpable excitement and buzz in the air. People in the crowd start counting down from thirty as the band’s lead singer shouts the numbers into his mic.

“Twenty-nine!”

I smile up at Gunner, my heart beating faster.

“Twenty-eight!”

He clasps my face between his hands, his eyes searing into mine. “Happy New Year, sweetheart,” he says above the growing noise.

I grin. “Technically, the clock hasn’t struck mid—”

He lowers his head and claims my mouth. Everything inside me rejoices at the rightness of this moment. The rightness of this man.

Our lips are still locked when the first burst of fireworks explodes across the sky and celebratory cheers erupt from the crowd.

I smile into my Prince Charming’s eyes and whisper, “Happy New Year.”

His smile is tender. “The best is yet to come.”

Epilogue



GUNNER

THE RECORDS ARRIVED THREE WEEKS LATER.

Marlowe's mother planned to give them to her as a wedding present. But I nixed that plan, telling her my baby had been deprived of her father's record collection long enough. I was ready and willing to use Mafia-style strongarm tactics. But I didn't have to; she handed over the key to the storage unit without a single peep.

I dispatched a plane to Pittsburgh to retrieve the long-lost records. As I carefully explained to my courier, Bowen Somerset's music collection was more valuable than the Hope Diamond and all the crown jewels of Europe combined. It had to be handled with the utmost care.

Even after issuing my explicit instructions—with a veiled threat of violence—I was so anxious for the safe delivery of the records that I could barely focus on work that day. I was more keyed up than a first-time father pacing the maternity ward waiting room.

When the albums finally arrived, I had them carted to the library. There were hundreds of them, an eclectic variety of artists and genres: rock 'n' roll, pop and funk, jazz and blues, the greatest orchestras of all time. It was a treasure trove worthy of any museum collection.

When Marlowe came home from class that evening, I took her by the hand and led her to the library. She was laughing

and teasing me about feeding her dinner before getting some action. But when she entered the room and saw the stacks of open boxes containing the vinyl records, her knees buckled beneath her, and she would have fallen if I hadn't caught her and held her steady.

She looked back and forth between me and the records. Then she started crying, and damn if my heart didn't melt all to hell. She kissed me with trembling lips and whispered, "Thank you so much."

I could only nod, not trusting my voice.

She walked across the room and began sifting gently through the records, pulling them out and staring at the covers, holding particular ones close to her chest with a sweetly nostalgic smile.

I watched from the doorway, giving her the space and time she needed to get lost in her memories. Her quiet sorrow and vulnerability made me feel even more fiercely protective. I was ready to suit up in armor and slay fucking dragons for her. Whatever she needed, I was her man.

I knew nothing would pry her away from the records that evening, so I ordered pizza and ate with her on the library floor while listening to some of her father's favorite songs on an old record player. When Tom Petty's "Free Fallin'" started playing, she jumped up excitedly and grabbed my hand. We danced and laughed, throwing our heads back and belting out the chorus at the top of our lungs. By the time we were done, happy tears were rolling down her face, and I kissed them all away.

That weekend she painstakingly reorganized the records, and now her father's cherished music collection has its own dedicated section in the library—her favorite room in the house.

With my birthday approaching, I was feeling pretty damn good about my life and the future. I knew I had much to be grateful for. Good health. Successful businesses. A net worth into the stratosphere. Supportive family and friends.

Most important of all, I had the love of a good woman. Not just any woman. The love of my life.

Maverick and I had always celebrated our birthday with a big blowout bash, and this year was no exception. But Marlowe had an early surprise in store for me. Using her work connections, she'd secretly rented out a concert hall. The night before my birthday, she arranged for Trace to drive me there after work.

When I arrived and found the concert hall empty, I honestly didn't know what to think. I took a seat front and center, an intrigued audience of one. Seconds later the lights dimmed, the curtains parted and a spotlight shone on a gleaming grand piano on stage.

Then Marlowe came walking out in a shimmering ice-blue gown that made her look like a fairytale princess. She was an absolute vision, and she stole my damn breath.

She gave me a radiant smile and took a bow, then sat at the piano and began playing a song she'd written for me.

I sat there spellbound, thoroughly entranced, watching her graceful fingers float over the piano keys as if by magic. Her dark hair flowed down her back, shining in the spotlight as she poured her heart and soul into every exquisite note.

It was the single most beautiful song I had ever heard in my life.

On the way home, I made love to her in the backseat of the limo. I devoured her like it was our very first time, with such insatiable ferocity that she literally sobbed and begged for mercy. She played the song again for me before we went to bed and the next day at my party.

Best. Birthday. Gift. *Ever.*

Oh, and the name of the song? "Boss of Me." When she told me, I laughed loud and long and kissed her senseless.

Needless to say, life with my new fiancée has been phenomenal so far. Not that we haven't hit any bumps in the road.

Shortly after our engagement, word got back to me that Harlan Pierce tried to have Marlowe blackballed from the local music industry. His unsuccessful smear campaign filled me with pure, seething rage. Rather than disembowel him—my first choice—I quietly set the ball in motion to acquire his company.

My first move was to buy controlling interest in Digitistic. Then I used backchannels to target certain board members who were dissatisfied with Harlan’s leadership. Every last one of them jumped ship to align with me.

Harlan, naturally, is in full-blown panic mode.

It didn’t have to be this way. I was willing to bury the hatchet once and for all. A man who has everything makes peace, not war. But Harlan just couldn’t leave well enough alone. He was hell-bent on keeping our feud alive, but he made a fatal error by coming after the woman I love.

At the end of February, my attorney calls me at work. “Just wanted to let you know we’re good to go. All the *i*’s have been dotted and the *t*’s crossed. The company’s shareholders are more than happy with the new stock price. You’re supported by the majority of the board of directors, and the few remaining holdouts will probably fold under pressure. Barring any unlikely surprises, your bid will be accepted unanimously.”

“Perfect.” I smile a cold smile. “Good work.”

“Hey, it was your master plan. I just executed your wishes,” Archie quips humorously. “Harlan should have realized a long time ago that you’re way out of his league. He’s been punching above his weight for years, trying to go toe-to-toe with you. And now it’s going to cost him everything.” Archie chuckles, thoroughly enjoying the moment. “So after you give him the boot, what do you have planned for your new company?”

“Gonna do some restructuring and form a label called Blue Wish Records. We’ll sign new artists and have album release parties at my club. I also want to remaster and rerelease some of Bowen Somerset’s recordings. Maybe I’ll let Marlowe run

that division—or the entire company—when she’s ready in a few years. She has more musical knowledge in her little pinky finger than Harlan has in his whole goddamn body.”

“Well shit, Ransom. Remind me never to get on your bad side,” Archie says with an admiring chuckle. “Congratulations on your new acquisition. I’ll await your further instructions.”

“Excellent. I’ll be in touch.” I end the call and lean back in my chair with my fingers steeped under my chin, lips curving with vicious satisfaction as I imagine the look on Harlan’s face when I stroll into his boardroom to seize the reins.

Checkmate, motherfucker.

“Mr. Ransom?” Veronica singsongs over the intercom on my desk. “You have a visitor.”

I swivel from the window, my heart kicking like crazy when my gorgeous fiancée pokes her head around the open door and smiles at me.

“This a good time?”

“For you? Always.”

Her smile widens as she struts into the room. I lean back to watch her approach, my gaze caressing every curve of her body from her luscious breasts down to her long legs accentuated by spiked boots.

“I was on my way to the library and thought I’d pop in and say hi.” She hops up onto the corner of my desk and crosses her legs, her denim shirtdress riding up her thighs.

Just like that, my dick gets hard.

When I slide my chair close to her, she smiles and leans in for a kiss. Just touching her sends my blood rushing through my veins and pooling thick in my groin. I can’t get enough of her. I’m worse than a love-starved teenager.

We’re getting married in June, and not a day too soon. She wanted to get through the spring semester so she could relax and enjoy our wedding and honeymoon.

I can't wait to put another ring on her finger and make her my wife. I can't wait to start a family and raise children together.

I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with her. God willing, we'll have many long years together.

Our lips cling deliciously before I pull away to rub my nose against hers, our eyes still locked. "How'd everything go with the wedding planner this morning? Please tell me our mothers behaved themselves."

Marlowe grins. "Other than a few minor power struggles, they were on their best behavior."

"Really? Only a few power struggles?"

"Yup." An amused twinkle dances in her eyes. "Remember the warning you issued at our engagement party? When you threatened to ban them from our wedding if they say or do anything to upset me before June? I recall lots of pearl clutching. But I think they're taking your threat seriously."

"They should. I meant every word. I won't have them stressing you out trying to achieve *their* vision of the perfect society wedding. Same goes for Grandma Billingsley. She's even worse than my mother, if you can believe it." I grin. "So where are they now?"

"Our mothers? Trace dropped them off at some fancy tearoom. They can haggle about catering menus and seating charts over mint tea and scones."

I smile but I'm only half listening, distracted by how beautiful she looks with her sparkling hazel eyes and dark hair spilling over her shoulders and breasts. I want her captured on canvas, which means it's time to hire an artist to paint her portrait.

"Ooh, caffeine. I could use some of that." She picks up my cooling mug of coffee and sips appreciatively. "I have lots of reading to do tonight. I need all the caffeine I can get or I'm in trouble."

"Nah. You got this, Miss Straight A's."

She grins and sips more coffee, her eyes twinkling at me over the mug's rim.

I'm so proud of her and everything she's achieved so far. Though she doesn't graduate for another year, I've already planned a big bash for her at my villa in Lake Como. Nothing but the best for my baby.

She smiles at the framed pictures on my desk. The one of her twirling on the clifftop has been joined by our official engagement photo, which was taken as we kissed in the rowboat at sunset. A bit cheesy, but undeniably romantic.

"The first time I came to your office, your desk had no personal effects. Just paperwork and files," Marlowe murmurs, her fingers ghosting over our image. "What a difference love makes."

I smile softly. "Indeed."

She gives me a shy smile, and my chest swells with euphoria. God, I love this woman.

I trace circles over her knee like I did the night we met, and many nights since. I watch with satisfaction as her lips part and her eyes go hazy with arousal before she puts the coffee down.

"Believe it or not," she says huskily, "this isn't a booty call."

"No?" I slowly trail my fingers up under her dress. "What is it then?"

She catches my wrist to halt my upward trajectory.

I grin wolfishly.

She bites her lip to keep it from twitching. "Seriously, Gunner, I have so much to do. A wedding to plan. Chapters to read. Fellowship applications to review at work. Not to mention entertaining our houseguests, who actually—" She breaks off with a gasp when I slip my hand between her crossed legs. Her thighs clench around me, her pupils dilating.

I chuckle, my own body reacting to her arousal. "You hopped up on my desk in this sexy little dress and crossed

your hella sexy legs, and you honestly expected me to keep my hands to myself?”

“Y-Yes,” she croaks, her thighs quaking as I stroke her slowly through her lacy panties. “Th-That’s exactly what I expected.”

“Hmm. I don’t know, babe,” I taunt seductively. “You *say* this isn’t a booty call, but your body apparently didn’t get the memo.”

She tries to glare at me and fails miserably.

I laugh low and soft, gently parting her legs and standing between them. She stares up at me as I tenderly cradle her head in my hand, feeling her silky hair slide through my fingers.

“Tell you what,” I murmur against her smiling lips. “I’ll make sure no one disturbs you so that you can focus on your schoolwork. I’ll bring you dinner and ply you with all the caffeine your heart desires, including coffee ice cream for dessert. As for our wedding, let that fancy planner earn the fortune she’s charging us. And don’t worry about entertaining our mothers during their visit. Caroline and Tabitha can amuse themselves with shopping or spa hopping or whatever tickles their fancy. They’re alike in many ways,” I add wryly.

The glint in Marlowe’s eyes tells me she agrees.

I nibble her plush lower lip and press a kiss to each corner of her mouth. She moans and lets her head fall back, exposing her pretty neck. I nip at her soft skin, feathering lazy kisses and love bites that leave her quivering.

“Damn you, Gunner Ransom.” Her voice is throaty and breathless, making my cock even harder. “I only meant to pop in and say hello.”

I smile into her eyes. “Hello.”

A throaty laugh escapes her. Then she surrenders with a sigh, wrapping her arms around my neck to bring her breasts flush against my chest. Her nipples are so tight beneath her dress that my tongue aches to lick them.

I hook an arm around her waist, pulling her up against me and crushing my mouth to hers. We kiss deep and long, my tongue slashing against hers in slow erotic movements that make her moan.

When she slides her hand between us to cup my hard dick, I choke out a rough groan. She smiles against my lips before gently squeezing my balls. I almost blow a load right there in her hot little hand.

Cock throbbing against my zipper, I press the intercom button on my phone. "Hold all my calls until further notice, Veronica."

"Sure thing, boss." There's a knowing grin in her voice. "Should I order lunch for you and your lovely bride-to-be?"

"Good thinking. Thanks." Clicking off, I reach under Marlowe's dress and peel her panties down her legs. I want to spread her out and taste her for hours, but fuck if I don't have a meeting that I really can't miss.

Giving her a dirty wink, I tuck her lacy underwear in my top desk drawer, then make quick work of my belt and zipper.

Licking her lips, Marlowe shoves my pants and briefs down to my knees with enough force to make my belt buckle jangle loudly.

I lift her off the desk, purring approval when she locks her legs around my hips like a good girl. When I feel just how wet she is, I hiss in a breath and rumble, "Not a booty call, my ass."

"Be quiet," she pants.

I grin darkly and palm the sweet curves of her bottom, stroking my erection against her weeping folds.

She gasps, her fingers curling into my shoulders for support.

I lift her over my aching cock and slowly lower her, groaning at her slick heat and tightness, an intoxicatingly perfect fit.

The rest of the world falls away as I begin thrusting into her, feeling her pulse around me.

“I can’t wait for you to have my babies,” I whisper against her mouth.

“Oh wow,” she breathes, eyes glimmering. “Just how many babies are we talking about?”

“At least three. Like we agreed.”

“What about two?” she says just to be contrary, because that’s how it is with us. “Two is a nice even number.”

“So is four.”

She grins. “Smartass.”

I chuckle hoarsely. I’m already fighting off an orgasm because she feels so damn incredible, and even our playful bickering turns me the hell on.

She bites my lip and smirks. “I’m going to start wearing pants over long johns when I come here. You need to work a little harder to get—*ahhh*,” she moans when I thrust deeper, circling my hips to exploit a different angle.

“What were you saying?” I taunt as she ripples hotly around my cock. “Something about me working harder? I’m literally the hardest working man you know.”

Her hands grip my shirt at the shoulders as I pump faster. “Keep talking and no more nooners for you,” she chokes out breathlessly. “In fact—”

When I hit her sweet spot, her mouth falls open in a little *O* and she makes a sound that tightens my balls painfully—an acceptable consequence.

When I slowly withdraw to the tip before plunging back inside, she shudders against me and groans, “You’re such a bad man.”

“No, baby,” I whisper on my next deep thrust, “I’m just a man in love.”

Author Note

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Gunner and Marlowe's passionate love story!

Back in the day, I announced to my readers that I'd written a few romance novels under a secret pen name (for reasons I'll explain another time). After all these years, I decided to rerelease the books under my real name. Why now? Honestly, I wanted to give my loyal fans new stuff to read while you patiently wait for *Yes, Captain*.

In no way are these books meant to be a substitute for Hunter's story. Just think of them as tasty appetizers to be enjoyed before the epic main course.

Over the years, *Boss of Me* has been updated and republished twice. I truly hope you enjoyed the third (and final) version.

Now that Gunner Ransom has found his one true love, Maverick is up next! Who can tame our resident bad boy? Who can heal his jaded heart and make him believe in happily ever after? You'll meet his soulmate in *Falling Hard for My Fake Boyfriend*, so please stay tuned!

As for Ember and Sedonia, I have someone specific in mind for both of them. Their mystery men will appear in the next book, which gives you even more reasons to look forward to *Falling Hard for My Fake Boyfriend*.

After taking a four-year hiatus due to burnout, it feels so good to be writing again and interacting with my fans. I've missed you all, and I look forward to bringing you many more steamy love stories to feed your romantic soul.

If you enjoyed *Boss of Me*, please consider leaving a review or rating. Your support is very much appreciated!

As always, I love to hear from you! Please share your thoughts with me on social media or at author@maureen-smith.com.

Until next time, happy reading!

Love always,

Maureen

Ransom Pillionaires

Boss of Me

Falling Hard for My Fake Boyfriend

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About the Author

Maureen Smith is a *USA Today* bestselling author who has garnered critical acclaim for her sensual romances and heart-pounding romantic suspense. She has won a Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award (nominated for seven total) and numerous Emma Awards. She also writes sexy women's fiction under the award-winning pen name Naomi Chase.

Before becoming an author, Maureen interned with a former U.S. presidential candidate, worked at the famous Watergate complex, and enjoyed a stint as a reporter and freelance writer. She is married to her college sweetheart and they have two children.

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