



Christmas With A Billionaire

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Description: Holding the Guinness World record for the most prominent philanthropist globally – Tyson's gift-giving is unmatched. But what he really wants is to give his best friend everything her heart desires, and it's the one thing outside of his control.

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Chapter 1

Autumn

It was five weeks before Christmas, and the Art Institute of Chicago became my refuge from the holiday rush. The quiet halls after hours wrapped me in serenity, and my footsteps echoed as I made my final rounds, taking in the stunning pieces from our upcoming exhibition featuring emerging Black artists from the South Side. Each painting told a story of home, love, and triumph—stories that deserved to be heard.

“There’s my favorite curator.”

The deep, warm voice sent ripples of recognition through me before I even turned around. Twirling on my heels brought about a satisfaction to my soul that I warred with whenever he entered my space. Tyson Benefield stood in the doorway, his broad frame filling the area with a presence that made the vast gallery feel intimate. He looked like he’d stepped straight out of a GQ cover in his onyx suit. He’d loosened his tie, and his jacket was draped over one arm – the picture of casual elegance that only he could pull off. My heart performed its usual betrayal, beating faster at the sight of him.

“You’re supposed to be in New York.” A smile spread across my face as he crossed the room toward me. I counted his steps, measuring the decreasing distance between us as his warm and spicy cologne wrapped around me like an embrace.

“And miss watching you in your element? Never.” He stopped beside me, his shoulder brushing mine as we gazed at the painting before us. “Tell me what you

see.”

I breathed in his familiar scent. It reminded me of late-night study sessions and early-morning coffee runs from our college days. “It’s a piece by Jasmine Taylor. She paints the South Side as we remember it – full of life, color, and promise. Here, the artist captures—” I turned to gesture at a detail and found him already looking at me, his dark eyes intense. The words died in my throat.

For a heartbeat, we stayed frozen like that, teetering on the edge of something that had been building for longer than either of us cared to admit.

I cleared my voice. “Um... the artist perfectly depicts those summer afternoons.”

“Like on your daddy’s porch.” His voice softened with the memory. “I see it. What an amazing eye you have.”

I warmed at his compliment.

“I remember how we used to sketch out our dreams. You with your gallery, me with my first hotel.”

“And look at us now.” I turned to face him, reaching up to fix his crooked tie without thinking. His eyes combed over my face - soft, warm, and inviting. “Mr. Hotel Mogul himself, dropping by unannounced.”

His hand covered mine where it rested on his tie, soothing and steady. “Would you prefer I made an appointment?”

“You can do whatever you like; no one would care or dare to stop you.”

“I’m not talking about anyone. I’m talking about you.”

We eyed each other, and a ripple of warmth slipped through me.

“I care about what you care about, Autumn. If you’d like me to make an appointment to see you, I will.”

I smiled. “That’s not necessary. I enjoy your uninvited appearances,” I laughed teasingly.

“You like yanking my chain, don’t you?”

“At times,” I winked, and he winked back.

“Some things never change, Autumn. Like you straightening my ties after twenty years.”

“Someone has to keep you presentable.” Before stepping back, I smoothed the silk one final time, but his smile kept me anchored.

“Have dinner with me tomorrow night,” he said. “I have a proposition for you.”

“Business or pleasure?” The words slipped out before I could catch them. I turned quickly and strutted away to mask the embarrassment on my face.

He chuckled, the sound rich and deep and his hand caught my fingers as he turned me back to him in a soft spin on my heels.

“A night of pleasure with me would move us beyond friends, and we would never go back, sweetheart.” We drifted closer. “Is that what you want?”

My pulse spiked, my heart thrummed, and my eyes highlighted in surprise. “I—Tyson?”

He smirked, dropped his head, and laughed. “I’m only kidding – if you are.”

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I sucked in a breath.

“But I need Chicago’s finest curator for a project at the Benefield, and I need my best friend to help me make sure I don’t mess it up.”

“What kind of project?”

“I want to feature local artists throughout the hotel. Something similar to what the Art Institute is presenting but in a more prominent fashion. I need a curator with vision, someone who understands the art world and the soul of this city.”

“And you thought of me?”

“I always think of you.” The words hung between us, heavy and charging.

I sucked in a breath. “Come with me.”

Inside my office, I gathered my things while he made himself comfortable in the chair across from my desk. It struck me how natural this felt—him in my space, the easy back-and-forth we’d perfected over decades.

“Tomorrow is Daddy’s retirement party, remember?”

“Perfect timing. I’ll pick you up at seven, we’ll make an appearance at Uncle James’s party – you know he considers me family anyway – and then we’ll discuss my project over dinner.”

“You’ve got it all planned out, don’t you?”

“When it comes to you? Always.” His eyes held mine, filled with something that made my heart skip. “Wear that red dress you showed me last month. The one you said was too bold for a museum opening.”

“You remember that?”

He stood, closing the distance between us. His fingers brushed my cheek as he tucked a stray curl behind my ear. “I remember everything about you. That’s what best friends are for.”

“Seven o’clock sharp,” I said. “Don’t be late.”

“Have I ever let you down?” He backed toward the door, that signature smile playing on his lips.

“Not once in twenty years.”

He was gone before I could say more, but his presence lingered – in the scent of his cologne, the warmth of his touch, and the promise of tomorrow night. I touched my cheek where his fingers had been, allowing myself to wonder what it might be like to cross that line we’d drawn so carefully all those years ago.

Then I gathered my things and headed home, trying to convince myself that the flutter in my stomach was just anticipation for Daddy’s party, not the thought of Tyson Benefield in a perfectly tailored suit waiting to take me to dinner.

Chapter 2

Tyson

I pulled up to Autumn's Hyde Park apartment at six-fifty-five, killing the engine of my Range Rover. The gift box on my passenger seat held a bottle of James's favorite bourbon – a spirit he would welcome to receive. Snow dusted my shoulders as I strolled to Autumn's door, my polished dress shoes leaving tracks in the fresh ice.

My knuckles barely touched her door before it swung open. The sight of her stole my breath. That red dress draped her curves like it was made for her, stopping just above her knees. Her hair fell in soft curls around her face, and a hint of gold shimmer highlighted her cheekbones.

"You're early," she stepped back to let me in, and the scent of her jasmine perfume wrapped around me.

"You're stunning." The words came out before I could filter them, but I didn't regret it.

She smoothed her hands over the dress. "This old thing?"

"Don't play modestly. You know exactly what that dress is giving."

Her laugh filled the space between us. "Help me with this?" she turned, exposing the smooth skin of her back where her necklace clasp waited.

My fingers brushed her neck as I fastened the gold chain. "Your mother's necklace?"

"Seemed right for Daddy's big night." She turned back to face me, too close and not close enough. "You clean up nice yourself."

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I'd chosen my navy suit carefully, knowing she'd notice the details - the perfect tailoring, the silver cufflinks she'd given me last Christmas. "Ready to make an entrance?"

"Yes," she grabbed her clutch from the entry table. "Let's go."

The drive to her parents' house in Beverly gave me too much time to notice how her dress rose slightly when she crossed her legs and tapped her fingers against her knee to the rhythm of the soft jazz playing through my speakers.

"You're quiet tonight," she said.

"Just thinking about your father's face when he sees how many people showed up to celebrate him."

"He hates being the center of attention."

"And yet you convinced him to let Diana throw this party."

She grinned. "I can be very persuasive when I want to be."

We pulled up to the Williams family home - a stunning Victorian James had restored himself over the years. Cars lined both sides of the street, and light spilled from every window.

Inside, the house buzzed with energy. Diana had transformed the space with elegant silver and blue decorations. The scent of her famous gumbo mixed with laughter and

music.

“There’s my girl!” James’s voice boomed across the room. He wrapped Autumn in a bear hug before turning to me. “And my second favorite troublemaker.”

I handed him the gift box. “Happy retirement, Uncle James.”

His eyes lit up at the bourbon. “Now, this is why you’re my favorite almost-son.”

“I thought Michael was your favorite almost-son,” Diana appeared, classy in a silver dress that matched her decorations.

“Michaelishis son,” I pointed out. “I had to earn my spot.”

“Through bribery, apparently.” Autumn bumped my shoulder with hers.

“Through loyalty,” James corrected his hand heavy on my shoulder. “Twenty years of it.”

Diana pulled Autumn away to greet other guests, leaving me with James. He studied the crowd with satisfaction.

“Every time I see you two, my mind drifts back to when you thought you could sneak out of this house without me knowing,” he said.

“We never actually made it past the creaky step.”

“Neither did Michael, but at least he tried alone. You two were always in it together.” He gave me a sideways look. “Still are.”

“Some things don’t change.”

“And some things should.” He took a sip of his new bourbon. “You’re not kids anymore, son.”

Before I could respond, Michael’s twins attacked my legs. “Uncle Ty!”

I scooped them both up, their small arms wrapping around my neck. “There are my favorite monsters!”

“Are you gonna marry Aunt Autumn?” Madison asked with all the directness of a seven-year-old.

James choked on his bourbon.

“Why would you ask that, princess?” I set them down carefully.

“Because Mommy said?—”

“Madison!” Angela appeared, shooting me an apologetic look. “Time for cake.”

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The twins ran off, leaving me with James's smirk and rising brows. "Out of the mouths of babes," he said.

I spotted Autumn across the room, laughing with her brother. The lights caught the gold in her dress, making her shine. As if sensing my gaze, she looked up, holding my eyes for a long moment before smiling.

"You know," James said quietly, "sometimes the best presents come after Christmas."

The party wound down slowly, family and friends drifting into the snowy night with warm hugs and promises to visit the newly retired judge. Autumn helped Diana clean up while I loaded gifts into cars and said goodbye to the stragglers.

"Ready for dinner?" I asked when we finally made it back to my car.

She kicked off her heels, curling her feet under her. "I thought you'd forgotten about your mysterious proposition."

"Not all that mysterious. I told you yesterday what it was about. Tonight, I'm giving you the details." I headed toward downtown, where I'd made reservations at Le Colonial. "Tell me why Madison thinks we're getting married."

Her laugh carried a nervous edge. "Angela needs to stop gossiping with my mother."

"Your mother's been planning our wedding since high school."

“Please, she gave up on us years ago. Now she just wants me married to anyone with a pulse and a portfolio.”

“Is that what you want?”

She turned to look at me, streetlights painting shadows across her face. “I want...” she paused. “I want dinner. I’m starving.”

The restaurant welcomed us with warm lighting and the smell of lemongrass. The maître d’ led us to a private corner booth, and Autumn slid in close enough that her knee touched mine.

“Now, about this proposition,” she picked up her wine glass, her red lipstick leaving a perfect print on the rim.

“The Benefield Chicago needs something different. Each floor will tell a story of our city through art.” I leaned forward, drawing energy from the interest in her eyes. “The lobby would showcase established artists - the ones who put Chicago on the map. But as guests move through the hotel, they’ll discover emerging talents. Every corridor, every space will feature different artists from different neighborhoods.”

“That’s ambitious,” she traced the rim of her glass. “How many pieces are we talking about?”

“At least two hundred. I want rotating exhibits in the main gallery space, permanent collections in the suites, and commissioned pieces for the restaurants and public areas.” I pulled out my phone, showing her the mock-ups. “See how these walls extend? Perfect sight lines for large-scale pieces. But for the launch I propose an auction – to put capital directly into the pockets of the artists.”

Her fingers brushed mine as she took the phone. “You’ve really thought this

through.”

“That’s not all.” I signaled for another bottle of wine. “You know the old building I bought on 47th Street?”

“The one you renamed the Benefield Building?” She smiled. “Subtle, by the way.”

“I think naming your cat Leonardo da Vinci gives you the least amount of room to talk,” I stole a piece of lemongrass chicken from her plate. “I’m converting the first three floors into the community arts center we used to dream about. Teaching spaces, studios for rent at reduced rates, and a gallery for student exhibitions. The top floors will be affordable live-work spaces for artists.”

She set down her fork. “You’re serious about this.”

“You know I wouldn’t consider pulling you into something I wasn’t serious about. Hopefully by now, you can tell when I’m joking and when I’m not.” Our eyes remained non-blinking as we stared at each other. Her nervous smile was etched at the corner of her lip. And that let me know she understood my reference but for her comfortability I eased back to the proposition.

“Think about it - we could offer residency programs and mentorship opportunities. Connect emerging artists with collectors through the hotel gallery. Create real pathways for talent right here in our community.”

“And you want me to curate all of this?”

“I want you to help me build it. From the ground up. Our vision, connections, and understanding of what artists need to thrive.” I covered her hand across the table with mine. “There’s no one else I trust more. Partners?”

She turned her fingers upward and squeezed my fingers. “Partners.”

My heart warmed as did my body. It didn’t go over me that she was always there when I needed her, and I would always be there for her no matter the cause or case.

Later, walking Autumn to her door, with snow falling softly around us, my mind shifted to what would happen if I kissed her. If I finally crossed that line we’d drawn so carefully all those years ago.

Instead, I pressed my lips to her cheek. “Goodnight, Autumn. Thank you for continuing to be a major part of my life.”

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She lingered in her doorway, a smile ushering to her lips. “Thank you for always thinking of me. With your reputation, you could have anyone you want in business or otherwise, but you keep coming back to me.”

I wanted her to rest in those words, to understand that there was a reason for that—she was my heart, but even as the philanthropic billionaire mogul that the world hailed me as, I was too afraid to admit it to her. I needed Autumn—whether we were friends or something more—and I couldn’t risk that she might pull away if my passion for her made our friendship awkward.

“I always will,” I reached out, pinched her chin, and she blushed.

“Goodnight, Ty.”

I waited until she was safely inside before heading home, the ghost of her perfume still clinging to my jacket, wondering how much longer we could dance around what was building between us.

But as her father had said, some Christmas presents were worth waiting for.

Chapter 3

Autumn

The Art Institute’s employee lounge offered little comfort during lunch breaks, but the coffee made up for the stiff chairs and fluorescent lighting. I stirred cream into my cup, breathing in the rich aroma while reviewing acquisition proposals on my tablet.

My navy pencil skirt shifted against my legs as I crossed my ankles, trying to find a comfortable position in the institutional furniture.

“Must be important paperwork.”

Marcus Richardson’s voice drew my attention from the screen. He stood by the coffee machine, his brown skin rich against the crisp white of his dress shirt, sleeves rolled to reveal muscular forearms. His black slacks and burgundy tie marked him as part of the administrative team - always polished, always professional.

“Proposals for the spring exhibition.” I set my tablet aside. “Though right now, the words are starting to blur together.”

“Sounds like you need a break.” He poured himself a cup, his cologne - subtle notes of cedarwood and grapevine - drifted over as he moved closer. “Maybe you need dinner?”

My heart stuttered – brows rising. Over the past few months, our coffee machine conversations had grown longer, warmer. His smile carried hints of interest I’d pretended not to notice.

“Dinner?” I smoothed my silk blouse, suddenly aware of every detail - the gold buttons, the way it draped, the single strand of Pearl’s at my throat. “Is that your way of asking me out on a date, Marcus?”

His smile was warm, and hopeful. “Yes. Will you go out on a date with me, Autumn - tomorrow night? I know this great Ethiopian place on Division Street.” He leaned against the counter, confident but not pushy. “Unless you’re busy?”

Tyson’s face flashed in my mind - his smile last night when he’d kissed my cheek, the warmth in his eyes at brunch. But we weren’t... we had never...

“I’d like that.” The words surprised me even as they left my mouth.

Marcus’s smile widened, revealing perfect white teeth. “I can pick you up at seven o’clock if that works for you.”

“I’ll meet you there.” At his raised eyebrow, I added, “I like to drive myself on first dates.”

“Smart woman.” He pulled out his phone. “Let me get your number.”

As we exchanged contact information, Latisha Harrison from my department appeared in the doorway. Her eyes darted between us, and I knew the gossip would be all over the building by the end of the day.

“Ms. Williams.” Her voice carried a hint of amusement. “The Stevenson collection representatives are here early.”

“I’ll be right there.” I gathered my things, very aware of Marcus watching me. “I’ll see you tomorrow at seven, Autumn.”

“Looking forward to it.” His fingers brushed mine as he handed me my tablet.

In the elevator, Latisha bumped my shoulder with hers. “Finally! I’ve watched him make excuses to get coffee whenever you’re in the lounge.”

“It’s just dinner.”

“With the finest corporate lawyer this side of Michigan Avenue.” She straightened her geometric print dress. “Have you seen his pro bono work with South Side artists? The man’s got substance to match those looks.”

The elevator doors opened to the gallery floor, where afternoon light played across marble floors. My heels clicked against the stone as we walked.

“Don’t start planning the wedding,” I warned.

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“Girl, please. We all know your heart’s been booked since college.” At my sharp look, she held up her hands. “Just saying, a certain hotel mogul might have opinions about you dating other men.”

“Tyson doesn’t get opinions about my dating life.” The words came out sharper than intended. “We’re friends. Business partners now, with this new project.”

“Mmhmm.” Latisha’s skepticism was evident. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Before I could respond, the Stevenson representatives approached, all handshakes and portfolios. I pushed the thoughts of both men aside, focusing on the familiar rhythm of negotiations and artistic value assessments.

But later, alone in my office, I found myself staring at Marcus’s number on my phone. He was handsome, successful, and committed to the community—the kind of man my mother would love. He asked for what he wanted instead of dancing around decades of friendship and unspoken feelings.

My phone buzzed with a text from Tyson: “Dinner at the hotel site tonight? I need your eye on the gallery space.”

I looked at Marcus’s number again before replying: “I can’t tonight. I have a deadline for the spring exhibition.”

A lie. Well... it wasn’t entirely a lie. But it was a half-truth and a step away from whatever was building between Tyson and me. Maybe that was for the best. But it didn’t rest well in my soul.

I placed my phone face down on my desk and turned to the window. Chicago stretched out before me, all steel and stone. Tomorrow, I would wear my favorite black dress - the one that hugged every curve - and have dinner with a handsome man who hadn't known me since childhood. Who didn't carry twenty years of history in every look, and every touch.

It was time to stop waiting for presents I wasn't sure I'd ever be brave enough to unwrap.

My phone buzzed again. Tyson: "Miss you already, partner."

I closed my eyes, breathing in the silence of my office. Outside, winter wind whipped between buildings, carrying snowflakes in a whirlwind – while inside, the whirlwind was inside my head and my heart.

Chapter 4

Autumn

Desta Ethiopian Kitchen wrapped me in warmth as I stepped through the door, the rich aroma of berbere and coffee filling the air. Marcus stood from his table, and I smiled - his black suit fit perfectly across his broad shoulders, the crisp white shirt setting off his dark skin.

"Right on time," he smiled, taking my coat. His fingers brushed my shoulders, and I caught a hint of his cedarwood cologne. "You look beautiful."

The black dress had been the right choice. It hugged my curves without trying too hard, the hem hitting just above my knees. "Thank you. This place smells amazing."

"Wait until you taste the food." He pulled out my chair. "Have you been here

before?”

“No, but I love Ethiopian cuisine.” I settled into my seat, arranging my dress. “My college roommate used to make the best doro wat.”

“Ah, a woman who knows her Ethiopian dishes.” He sat across from me, his warm brown eyes catching mine. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be impressed yet. That’s the only dish I know by name.”

His laugh was rich and deep. “Then allow me to expand your culinary horizons.”

The waiter appeared with menus and wine recommendations. As Marcus discussed vintages, I relaxed in the moment. This was nice—a simple, straightforward attraction. It was something I could get used to.

“So tell me about this spring exhibition you’re planning.” Marcus gave me his attention, genuinely interested. “I heard whispers about some controversial pieces.”

“Not controversial - challenging.” I took a sip of the wine he’d selected. “Art should make people think, push boundaries.”

“Like that piece in your lobby last month? The one about gentrification?”

“You noticed that?”

“I notice everything about—” His phone buzzed. “Sorry, let me silence this.”

“No, please. I know how it is with client’s emergencies.”

“No emergencies tonight.” He turned off his phone completely. “You have my full

attention.”

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The gesture shouldn't have made my stomach flip, but it did. When was the last time someone had given me their undivided attention without business or friendship getting in the way?

Our food arrived on a large platter lined with injera bread. Marcus showed me how to tear off pieces and scoop up the various stews and vegetables.

"The key is to use your right hand," he demonstrated. "Like this."

"My mother would be horrified." I mimicked his technique. "She spent years drilling proper table manners into me."

"Diana Williams and her etiquette lessons." At my surprised look, he smiled. "Small world. She helped organize that charity auction I worked on last spring."

"The one for youth arts programs?"

"Exactly. Now I know where you get your passion for art education."

"Tell me about this young artist you helped," I said, reaching for my wine. "The intellectual property case."

"Denise Jordan. Eighteen years old, painting murals that'll take your breath away." Marcus set down his fork, passion lighting his face. "She created this series about growing up on the South Side - raw, powerful pieces. Then a corporation used her work in advertising without permission or credit."

“What did you do?”

“Filed a cease and desist, negotiated fair compensation. But that wasn’t the best part. I helped her draft her first licensing agreement. Now she’s got murals commissioned all over Chicago, making real money from her art.”

“I’d love to see her work.”

“She’s got a piece over on 63rd Street. I could show you sometime.” His eyes met mine. “What about you? Tell me about your first exhibition.”

“I was fresh out of college and convinced I knew everything.” I laughed at the memory. “I wanted to showcase artists who’d never been in galleries before. My mother thought I was crazy.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I picked five artists who worked in unconventional mediums. One created sculptures from demolished building materials. Another made installations using old vinyl records and cassette tapes.”

“How’d it turn out?”

“On opening night, nobody showed up for the first hour. I stood there in my new dress, trying not to cry.” I shook my head. “Then this group of art students came in. They started talking about the pieces and asking questions. By the end of the night, we’d sold three major works.”

“That must have felt amazing.”

“It taught me to trust my instincts. That sometimes the best art comes from

unexpected places.” I took another bite of food. “Like this restaurant - I would have never found it on my own.”

“My grandmother introduced me to Ethiopian food.” His expression softened. “She raised me after my parents died. She used to say food was the best way to understand other cultures.”

“She sounds wise.”

“She was. She taught third grade for forty years and believed education could change the world.” A server refilled my water glass, then bustled away. “That’s why I do the pro bono work. Art, education, community development - it all connects.”

“Is that what made you choose law?”

“Originally? I wanted to make money.” His honesty surprised me. “I grew up without much and thought success meant a big salary and a corner office.”

“What changed?”

“My first year at the firm, I took this case pro bono - an arts program fighting eviction from their building. Watching those kids perform in their saved space,” he shook his head. “It made me realize money is good, but purpose is better.”

“That’s beautiful, Marcus.”

“Yeah?” His smile turned playful. “Most women find corporate law pretty boring.”

“Most women haven’t spent their lives fighting for arts funding.” I raised my glass. “To purpose over profit.”

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“To unexpected connections.” He clinked his glass against mine, and I drank the rest of my wine.

“Would you like another glass?” He gestured to the wine bottle.

“I should pace myself. I have an early meeting tomorrow.”

“About the Benefield Project?”

My hand stilled on my wine glass. “How did you know that?”

“Like I said, it’s a small world. My firm handles some of Tyson’s legal work.”

“Oh.” I reached for my water instead of the wine. “Yes, we’re partnering on a new gallery space.”

“Just partners?”

Before I could respond, my phone lit up with Tyson’s face. I moved to silence it.

“Please, don’t silence your phone on my behalf. I know how important you are,” Marcus said. “It might be important.”

A text came through, and I scanned the message.

“There’s a pipe burst at the Benefield Building. Water is threatening the newly renovated first floor. I’m sorry to interrupt you. If you have a minute, I need you.”

I stood, gathering my purse. “I have to go, unfortunately. There’s an emergency at?—”

“Let me drive you,” Marcus was already signaling for the check. “If it’s an infrastructure issue, you might need legal eyes anyway.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“I want to.” That slowed my progress as our eyes met. I smirked and nodded. “Okay.” He paid quickly, helping me with my coat.

The drive to 47th Street was quick, the streets empty this late. Marcus’s BMW purred through the light snow, his hand steady on the wheel.

Walking across the street, the scene at the Benefield Building kept my protest about Marcus coming in the back of my throat - water pooled on the sidewalk, reflecting red and blue emergency lights.

Tyson stood with the fire department, his onyx suit jacket discarded, shirt sleeves rolled up. He turned as we approached, and something flickered in his gaze when he saw Marcus’s hand at the small of my back.

“Sorry to interrupt your evening.” His voice was perfectly professional. “But we need to make some decisions about the affected areas.”

“Marcus Richardson.” Marcus extended his hand. “From Caldwell & Ross. We’ve spoken on the phone.”

“Of course.” Tyson’s handshake was brief. “Autumn, they’re telling me the water damage extends to the area we marked for the student gallery.”

I kicked off my heels, holding them in one hand as I followed them inside—water squished under my stockinged feet. The space we'd planned to showcase student work - the heart of our community project - bore the worst damage.

“The specialty flooring,” I said. “It won't survive this.”

“We can expedite replacement materials,” Marcus offered. “I know a contractor who specializes in gallery spaces.”

“We have contractors.” Tyson's tone remained professional, but I caught the edge beneath it.

“Who'll take weeks to source the materials.” I assessed the damage. “Marcus, your contact - they do emergency work?”

“I'll call them now.” He stepped away, phone already out.

Tyson moved closer, his voice low. “Didn't expect company tonight.”

“He wanted to help.”

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“I’m sure he did.”

“Don’t.” I turned to face him. “We need solutions right now, not...”

“Not what?”

“Just help me figure out how to save our gallery.”

“I appreciate you, which is why I called, but I don’t need Marcus’s contractors. My guys are just as quick, if not quicker.” He sighed. “I’m sorry I interrupted your... date?”

I locked my jaw, and unfamiliar anxiety that I’d never felt with Tyson filled me to the rim.

He smirked. “Never mind.”

He strolled a few feet away, and I stood awkwardly, unaware of how to feel.

For the next hour, we worked alongside the emergency response team. Marcus made calls, expedited paperwork, and smoothed over permit issues. Tyson directed cleanup crews and documented damage. I coordinated with our artists to protect their preliminary installations.

Finally, the immediate crisis passed. Marcus touched my arm. “Let me take you home. It’s late.”

“I can handle that.” Tyson stepped forward. “We need to discuss next steps anyway.”

They stared at each other, neither backing down. I stood between them, water seeping into my stockings, my perfect date night dress probably ruined.

“I should get home, and Tyson is right. We need to discuss what happens now.” My voice cut through the tension. “Marcus, thank you for dinner. And for your help tonight.”

“My pleasure.” He kissed my cheek, his lips warm against my skin. “Maybe we can have a do-over at Desta. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I nodded, watching him leave. When I turned back, Tyson stood closer than before.

“Dinner at Desta?” he said with an air of contempt. “Good choice. You used to say Ethiopian food was only good when Jasmine made it.”

“People change.”

“Do they?” he reached out, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “You’ve got plaster dust in your hair.”

“Pretty sure my whole outfit is a disaster.”

“You look beautiful.” The words came out rough, almost angry. “He’s a good lawyer.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Smart, successful, probably knows which fork to use at fancy dinners.”

“Tyson...”

“We need to talk about the gallery floor.” He stepped back, professional mask sliding back into place. “Over breakfast tomorrow?”

“I have a meeting.”

“Lunch then. Pearl’s at noon.”

It wasn’t a question. I nodded anyway, gathering my wet shoes.

“I’ll drive you home.” He placed his hand on my back, exactly where Marcus’s had been earlier. But his touch burned through the damp fabric of my dress, setting my skin on fire.

At his Range Rover I turned back to him.

“My car is still at Desta. I drove to dinner but left hurriedly when you called, and Marcus insisted on driving me here. If you don’t mind, you can drive me to the restaurant.”

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He nodded. “That was nice of him.”

We stared and he motioned for me to get in the passenger seat.

The drive to the restaurant passed in silence, thick with words we didn’t say. When we arrived, Tyson walked me to my car and opened my door.

“I’ll follow you home.”

I nodded and strapped my seatbelt across me.

At my apartment, Tyson caught my hand before I could escape inside.

“Was it a good date?” His voice was soft, dangerous. “Before the interruption?”

“Yes.” I met his eyes. “It was.”

“Good.” He released me. “You deserve good things, Autumn.” He turned to leave.

“Tyson.” He paused and faced me.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

He stared at me a long moment, then, “Never been better,” but he was holding back.

“You’ve never lied to me before, have you?”

His brows rose. “No.”

“Then why would you do it now?”

His nostrils flared, his eyes going dark as they combed over me. “Okay. I’m not fine. Is that what you want to hear?”

“No, but it’s the truth, so I’d rather that than you lie. Tell me what I can do to help.”

He smirked, and I could see the flex in his jaw. But all he had to do was spit it out. Tell me how much he wanted me, wanted us—and I would give up the pretense right now, too. But the longer he held back, the more I knew what was coming next.

“It’s not your problem to fix, Autumn. It’s mine. And I’ll be fine. I want you to be in good hands, and if Marcus is your guy, then...” he nodded.

“For the record, I never said Marcus is “my guy,” it was just a date.”

He nodded again. “Okay.” His gaze fell from mine as he looked around the neighborhood and then back to me. “Do me a favor. If at any time you don’t feel safe with anyone, tell me.”

My eyes widened. “Tyson...”

“Please,” he begged.

A knot formed in my throat, and I nodded. “I will.” He stepped close, lifted my hand, and placed a kiss on the back.

“Have a good night.”

With that, he walked away, leaving my heart pounding and uncertain about our friendship.

Chapter 5

Tyson

We were supposed to meet at Pearl's the next day, but I needed more time alone. Seven days passed since the incident at the Benefield Building. Seven days of drowning myself in meetings and photoshoots, signing contracts, and approving designs, anything to keep Autumn off my mind. The workaholic in me needed the distraction, but it wasn't enough. The image of her in that black dress, standing at her door, asking me why I lied about being okay, played repeatedly in my head.

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Now, at eleven-thirty p.m., I stood in my office at the Benefield Building reviewing contractor estimates. The night was quiet except for industrial fans running throughout the space. My phone buzzed and a text from Autumn lit up my screen: “Still at the building?”

“Yes. Reviewing estimates,” I replied.

“Coming up.”

My heart kicked against my ribs. Minutes later, she walked through my office door carrying a paper bag that smelled like heaven.

“Pearl’s sent food,” she said. “Grandma Rose insists you’re working too hard.”

“Did you tell her I was here?”

“No, but she knows you,” she set the bag on my desk. “When I stopped by for dinner, she packed this up and said, ‘Take this to that boy. He’s probably still working.’”

I smiled at Rose’s intuition. “What else did she say?”

Autumn unpacked containers of Rose’s famous gumbo and cornbread. “That I should make sure you eat.”

“Is that why you’re here? To feed me?”

“Actually, I came to help sort through the student artwork we salvaged.” She pushed

a container toward me. “But first, you need to eat something that isn’t coffee.”

I accepted the food, watching as she settled into the chair across from my desk, tucking one leg under her. She’d changed from her work clothes into leggings and an old Northwestern sweatshirt—my sweatshirt, the one she’d stolen years ago. Her hair fell in loose curls around her face and as usual her beauty struck me in a way that warmed my heart and strengthened my dick.

“Have you heard anything from the contractors?” she asked between bites.

“They can start next week, but we need to catalog everything first.” I dipped the cornbread in gumbo. “The insurance adjusters want detailed documentation.”

“Then let’s get to work.” She stood, grabbing her container. “We can eat while we sort.”

I followed her to the large storage room where we moved the salvaged artwork. The space was lined with metal shelves, most still empty, waiting to be filled with student pieces once the renovation was complete. Boxes of artwork sat on tables, waiting to be organized.

“I made a preliminary inventory,” she said, pulling out her tablet. “But we need to check each piece for water damage.”

We worked systematically through the boxes for the next hour, carefully examining each painting. I handled the heavy lifting while she documented everything, her fingers flying across the screen as she updated her database.

“This reminds me of when we had to reorganize the entire art department storage room in college,” she marked off another box.

“Because someone knocked over an entire shelf of clay sculptures.”

“That wasn’t my fault! You startled me.”

“You were dancing with headphones on in a room full of breakable art.”

She threw a piece of bubble wrap at me. “You weren’t supposed to be there at midnight.”

“Neither were you.” I caught the bubble wrap. “But you needed help finishing your project, so...”

“So, you came.” She smiled softly. “You always do.”

The moment hung between us, with insinuation stirring her words. I cleared my throat. “These portfolios need to go on the top shelf. Hand them to me.”

She gathered the large black cases while I positioned the ladder. She passed them up one by one, our fingers brushing with each exchange. From my height on the ladder, I could see the graceful line of her neck as she tilted her head back to watch me place each portfolio.

“Careful with that one,” she called up. “It’s Denise Jordan’s work—the girl Marcus helped with the copyright case.”

My grip tightened on the portfolio. “Right.”

“These kids are incredible, Ty. Wait until you see—” She stepped backward, stumbling over a box.

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I reacted, climbing down and steadying her with an arm around her waist, pulling her tightly against my chest. She grabbed my shoulders, and our proximity had her face inches from mine.

“You okay?” My voice came out rough.

She nodded but didn’t let go. “Just clumsy.”

“You’ve always been clumsy.” I should have released her, but my arm stayed locked around her waist. “I also have memories of you falling into the campus fountain.”

“You pushed me.”

“I did not. You were walking backward, talking about some painting?—”

“The Monet exhibition at the Art Institute?—”

“And you didn’t see the fountain,” I chuckled. “But I jumped in after you.”

“Because my portfolio went in with me.” Her fingers played with the collar of my shirt, probably without realizing it. “You saved my sketches.”

“I saved you.” The words came out softer than intended.

Her phone chimed, but I was still under her spell. We stepped apart as she checked the message.

“It’s Marcus,” she said. “He had flowers delivered to my office. He wants to know if I got them.”

The distance between us suddenly felt like miles. “That’s... thoughtful of him.”

She didn’t respond, but our eyes met.

“We should finish the inventory.” I climbed back up the ladder. “What’s next?”

She hesitated before picking up another portfolio. We worked in silence for a while, the easy warmth of earlier replaced by something more complicated.

“These need to be labeled,” she said eventually, holding up a stack of manila folders.

I came down from the ladder, taking some of the folders. We sat on the floor, backs against the wall, sorting through student information. Our shoulders touched as we worked, and I was hyper-aware of every point of contact.

“Do you remember what you wanted to be when we were kids?” she asked suddenly.

“A basketball player.”

“Before that.”

I smiled, remembering. “A painter. Like you.”

“You weren’t bad, either.” She bumped my shoulder. “Your landscapes were good.”

“They were terrible. But you never said so.”

“Because you never gave up. Even when things were hard.” She looked at me.

“That’s what I’ve always admired about you.”

The sincerity in her voice made my chest tight. “I learned that from you. Watching you fight for your dreams, no matter what anyone said.”

“We fought together.” She rested her head against the wall, staring at me. “Still are.”

“Always will.” I reached over and squeezed her hand, meaning it to be quick and friendly. But her fingers interlaced with mine, and neither of us let go.

“Art means so much to me. All those hours I spent sketching in your grandmother’s kitchen while she cooked.”

“And somehow, never learning how to make her sweet potato pie.”

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“I was distracted,” she smiled. “You kept stealing my pencils.”

“You kept stealing my heart.” The words slipped out before I could catch them.

Her relaxed fingers stilled around mine and I waited for her to laugh it off like we always did when one of us stepped too close to the truth. Instead, she met my eyes. “Ty...”

The nickname hit me in the chest. She only called me that in moments like this - quiet moments when the walls between us turned paper-thin.

“We should check the climate control system,” I said, breaking the tension and changing the subject. “Make sure this room stays at the right temperature and humidity for the artwork.”

She nodded, letting me retreat to safer ground. I moved to the control panel, pretending to study readings I’d already memorized while my heart rate settled.

“The contractor Marcus recommended called back,” she said after a moment.

“We don’t need them.” My voice came out sharper than intended.

“They could start tomorrow. Get this space ready faster than?”

“I said no.” I turned to face her. “This is our project, Autumn. Yours and mine. We don’t need outside help.”

“Is that what this is about? You’re worried about Marcus being involved?”

“I’m worried about a lot of things.” I stepped closer. “Like you working yourself to exhaustion. Like these kids losing their chance to show their art. Like?—”

Losing you to Marcus.

Her phone chimed again. This time, she didn’t check it. We were locked onto each other, our eyes never wavering.

“It might be important,” I said, though I wanted to detain her there at this moment.

“I want to know what you were going to say. Like what?” We continued to stare, and I was two seconds away from pulling her into the heat of my mouth when I spoke again.

“We should finish the inventory.”

She stared at me, almost bewildered, but instead of responding she sighed and nodded.

We worked in comfortable silence for a while, but something had shifted. Every accidental touch sparked vigor, and every glance at one another carried an exchange.

Around two in the morning, I found her asleep on a stack of portfolios, just like in college. I draped my jacket over her shoulders and sat watching her breathe, remembering all the reasons I’d never crossed this line before.

But as I carried her to my car to drive her home, her body warm and trusting against my chest, I wondered if those reasons still mattered. If some risks were worth taking, and some lines worth crossing.

She stirred as I buckled her seatbelt. “Ty?”

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart.”

“Stay with me tonight?” Her voice was soft with exhaustion. “Like when we were kids?”

My heart clenched. How often had we fallen asleep in the same bed, pretending we were just friends? How many mornings had I woken up wanting more?

I drove through empty streets, stealing glances at her sleeping form. By the time we reached her building, she was fully asleep again. I carried her up to her apartment, using the key she’d given me years ago.

Inside, I laid her on her bed, removing her shoes but leaving her in my hoodie. As I pulled the blanket over her, she caught my hand.

“Don’t go,” she mumbled.

I peeled off my shoes with the back of my heel, pulled my shirt over my head, and crawled into bed behind her. She fell into a restful slumber easily, yet my mind whirled with thoughts of what could be.

Chapter 6

Autumn

The morning light streamed through my bedroom windows, and I stirred, feeling the solid warmth of Tyson's chest against my back. His arm draped heavily over my waist, our legs tangled beneath the covers. For a moment, I kept my eyes closed, savoring the familiar comfort of waking up beside him.

We'd done this countless times over the years - crashed at each other's places after late nights working or studying. But something felt different this morning. Maybe it was the way his muscles flexed against me as he breathed or how his palm pressed flat against my stomach, fingers splayed possessively even in sleep.

I turned carefully in his arms, studying his face in the soft light. His thick brows relaxed in sleep, long lashes casting shadows on his cheeks. The precise line of his jaw carried a shadow of stubble, and his full lips parted slightly as he breathed. Even asleep, he radiated power - all six-foot-five of him barely contained by my queen-sized bed.

My eyes traced the sculpted planes of his bare chest, remembering how he'd pulled off his shirt before climbing in beside me last night. The sight of his muscular torso had stopped my breath, but exhaustion had pulled me under before I could really appreciate it. Now, I wanted to run my fingers over the ridges of his abs, to trace the tattoo that curved around his ribs - our zodiac sign in artistic script.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand, and his eyes fluttered open. For a moment, we just looked at each other, neither moving.

“Morning,” he said, his voice rough with sleep.

“Morning.” I was acutely aware of how close we were, how his hand still rested on my hip.

His phone buzzed again. With a groan, he reached for it, reading the message over my shoulder. “The magazine crew is arriving at nine.”

Reality crashed back. Today was our feature interview for Art & Design Magazine - the first significant press coverage of the Benefield Project. I glanced at the clock. Seven-thirty.

“I need to get ready.” I started to move, but his arm tightened around me.

“Five more minutes,” he mumbled into my hair.

“Since when does Tyson Benefield, king of punctuality, want to sleep in?”

“Since my bed is more comfortable than usual.”

“This is my bed.”

“Exactly.” He pulled me closer, and I momentarily let myself sink back into his warmth.

When I finally extracted myself and headed for the shower, my skin still tingled where he’d touched me. I turned the water extra cold, trying to clear my head. Today needed to be about the project, not about how good Tyson looked sleeping in my bed or how right waking up in his arms felt.

By the time I emerged, he’d already left - probably to change at his penthouse before

the interview. A text waited on my phone: “Your car is still at the Benefield Building. I’ll be back to pick you up.”

I texted back: “There’s no time. I’m taking an Uber.”

“I’m bringing breakfast. Don’t stop for coffee.”

Two hours later, I walked into the Benefield Building’s lobby wearing my favorite navy pencil dress, my hair falling in careful waves. Tyson stood talking with a small group, commanding attention in a perfectly tailored navy suit emphasizing his broad shoulders. He’d trimmed his beard, and his smile flashed brightly against his dark skin as he gestured animatedly about something.

He spotted me immediately, breaking off mid-sentence to stride over. “Perfect timing. Come meet everyone.”

The magazine crew consisted of a writer, photographer, and Victoria Maples - the magazine’s executive editor, who’d flown in specifically for this piece. Victoria was stunning in a red power suit, her sleek black hair cut in a sharp bob.

“Ms. Williams,” she shook my hand. “I’ve followed your work at the Art Institute. Your last exhibition on emerging South Side artists was brilliant.”

“Thank you. Please, call me Autumn.”

“Autumn,” her smile warmed. “Tyson was just telling us about your vision for the community spaces. But first, we’d love photos of you both in the main gallery.”

The photographer, Edward, directed us through various poses—examining blueprints, discussing artwork placement, and standing before the restored windows. Victoria watched with keen interest.

“The chemistry between you is incredible,” she said during a break. “How long have you known each other?”

“Twenty years,” Tyson answered, his hand resting casually on my lower back. “We grew up together on the South Side.”

“And now you’re revolutionizing the Chicago art scene together,” Victoria’s eyes sparkled. “It’s like a fairy tale.”

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If only she knew how my heart raced every time he touched me, how I'd woken up wrapped in his arms this morning. But I kept my voice professional. "The real story is the opportunities this project will create for young artists."

"Speaking of which," Edward called out, "can we get some shots in the student gallery?"

Victoria asked us questions about the project's vision as we moved through the building. Tyson discussed the business aspects—the multi-million dollar investment, the innovative design, and the economic impact. I focused on the artistic elements and community programs.

"This space will house our mentorship program," I explained as we entered a large studio. "Established artists working directly with students, sharing techniques and business skills."

"It's extraordinary." Victoria traced her perfectly manicured fingers along a workbench, her eyes fixed on Tyson. "What inspired such an ambitious project? Most luxury hotels don't include community art spaces."

"Actually," Tyson smiled - that devastating smile that could charm anyone - "I've always wanted to do something different with my hotels. But watching Autumn fight for emerging artists at the Art Institute and seeing her passion for creating opportunities are what shaped this vision. She showed me how art could transform communities."

Victoria stepped closer to him, touching his arm. "That's fascinating. Tell me more

about your creative process. Perhaps over dinner?”

My stomach clenched at her obvious interest. How she looked at him - like he was a prize to be won - made me want to step between them.

“The project itself is more interesting,” Tyson replied smoothly, moving toward me. “Autumn and I spent years discussing what artists need to succeed. This program combines our dreams - my goal of redefining luxury hospitality and her vision for nurturing new talent.”

“You two are quite the team,” Victoria observed, her eyes lingering appreciatively on Tyson’s broad shoulders.

“The best,” Tyson agreed, and something in his tone made me look up. He watched me, not Victoria, with such intensity that I almost forgot we weren’t alone.

The way Victoria kept finding excuses to touch Tyson’s arm or stand close to him during photos shouldn’t have bothered me. He dealt with admirers constantly - it came with being wealthy, gorgeous, and successful. But something about her polished confidence and apparent interest set my teeth on edge. Whenever she laughed at his comments or batted her eyes, I felt a hot surge of jealousy.

Edward cleared his throat. “Let’s get some shots of you both by the windows. The light is perfect.”

As we posed, Victoria continued her questions. “Tyson, your hotels are known for their sophistication. How does this community focus align with your brand?”

“It enhances it.” His voice took on the confident tone he used in business discussions. “True luxury is creating meaningful experiences, contributing to culture. This project does both.”

“And the budget? A development of this scale can’t be cheap.”

“Money isn’t the point.” He shrugged, and I smiled - only a billionaire could dismiss millions so casually. “The point is impact.”

“Still,” Victoria pressed, “it’s a significant investment in an unproven concept.”

“Actually,” I interjected, “similar programs in other cities have shown impressive financial and social returns. I can share the data?—”

“The numbers don’t matter,” Tyson cut in. “I believe in this project. With Autumn helping me build it, nothing can stop us.”

Victoria’s eyes darted between us. “Fascinating. Tell me more about your working relationship. How do you balance such a long friendship with professional collaboration?”

“We trust each other completely,” I said.

“Always have,” Tyson added, his fingers brushing my arm as we turned for another photo.

“And personally?” Victoria smiled. “Surely working so closely affects your private lives?”

“We’re just friends,” I said quickly — too quickly, judging by her raised eyebrow.

“Bestfriends,” Tyson corrected, and I caught the slight emphasis on ‘best.’

The interview continued, but I was aware of every move Tyson made - how his eyes sought mine during questions, how his whole body seemed oriented toward me even

when speaking to others.

Finally, Victoria closed her notebook. “This is wonderful. One last shot for the cover?”

Edward positioned us by the grand staircase - Tyson leaning against the railing, me standing slightly in front of him. “Perfect. Now look at each other like you’re discussing plans.”

I turned to face Tyson, and the intensity in his dark eyes caught me off guard. His hand came up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, the gesture so natural it made me suck in a deep breath.

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“Beautiful,” Edward murmured, camera clicking. “The connection between you is amazing.”

If he only knew. I could still feel Tyson’s warmth from this morning, and I could still see how he looked, sleeping beside me. Every time his fingers brushed my skin, energy filtered through me.

“That’s a wrap,” Victoria announced. “Thank you both. This piece is going to be spectacular.”

As the crew packed up, she pulled me aside. “Whatever is between you two,” she said quietly, “it’s special. Don’t waste it.”

I watched her walk away, her words echoing in my head. Across the room, Tyson was checking messages on his phone, his powerful frame drawing every eye in the room. He looked up, caught me staring, and smiled. My heart fluttered, and my wondering thoughts returned. Why were we doing this dance? Couldn’t we just admit that we loved each other outside of friendship?

Or maybe he doesn’t love me in that way. And friendship is all he sees.

That thought crushed me, but I didn’t stay in that headspace when I heard his voice again.

“Lunch?” he asked, crossing to me.

“Don’t you have meetings?”

“I rescheduled them.”

“Why?”

“We should discuss the next steps. Are you hungry?”

“I could use a bite to eat.”

“It’s my treat.”

“Well, that’s all you had to say.”

He laughed, and we left in search of food.

Chapter 7

Autumn

“You’ve been distracted all week, and don’t tell me it’s about the Stevenson collection.” Latisha set one glass of wine and a margarita on our high-top table at Lush Wine Bar.

I licked the salt off my rim and took a sip. “The magazine interview was... interesting.”

“The Art & Design feature? Girl, that’s huge. The whole museum’s buzzing about it.” She settled onto her stool, smoothing her geometric print dress. “Did something go wrong?”

“No, it went well. Too well, according to Victoria Maples.”

“TheeVictoria Maples? Editor of A&D?” Latisha crossed her legs. “Details. Now.”

“She kept making comments about Tyson and me. About our ‘chemistry.’” I took a long sip of margarita. “And the photographer?—”

“What about him?”

“He said we had an amazing connection. Like we were—” I shrugged.

“Made for each other?” Latisha raised her eyebrows. “Baby girl, everyone sees it. Last month, when Tyson brought you lunch, three docents almost walked into walls watching you two.”

“He was just dropping off contracts.”

“Please. That man owns a dozen luxury hotels and probably has an army of lawyers, but he hand-delivers paperwork to you?” She shook her head. “And don’t get me started on how you act when he shows up.”

“How do I act?”

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“Like someone turned on all the lights in the room.” She sampled the cheese board between us. “You practically float for hours afterward.”

“I do not float.”

“Yesterday, he called during the board meeting. Your whole face changed when you saw his name on your phone.”

“We’re friends,” I protested. “Best friends.”

“Mmhmm. And how many ‘best friends’ look at you like they want to devour you whole?”

I choked on my margarita. “Latisha!”

“What? I’m just saying what everyone sees. That man is fine as hell, richer than the devil, and looks at you like you hung the moon. Meanwhile, you’re going on dates with Marcus. Don’t get me wrong, Marcus is fine and well off too.”

“It was one date.”

“And?”

“And it was nice. He’s nice.” I picked at a piece of bread. “He sent flowers to my office.”

“Nice?” Latisha rolled her eyes. “Girl, ‘nice’ is what you call your neighbor’s potato

salad. The way you talk about Tyson... that's different."

"How do I talk about him?"

"Like he's essential. Like breathing." She topped off our glasses. "When you told me about the Benefield Project, you didn't mention the prestige or the money. You talked about Tyson's vision of showcasing local artists and how you felt you may have inspired him."

"He's always believed in me."

"Exactly." She pointed her fork at me. "And don't think I haven't noticed you wearing his old college sweatshirt while lounging in your office."

My nipples tingled. "It's comfortable."

"It's massive on you. And you only wear it when you're stressed or sad." She studied me. "Like Tuesday, after Marcus asked you out again."

"How do you know about that?"

"Please. I know everything that happens at the Institute." She popped an olive in her mouth. "Including how you haven't given him an answer yet. Imagine having two fine, wealthy men after you." She shook her head. "I'm so fuckin' jealous."

I swirled my margarita, watching the deep red liquid catch the light. "Marcus is no Tyson. There's no one comparable to him."

Latisha pointed at me. "Do you hear yourself? Jesus, you've got it bad."

I blinked at her and took another sip of margarita.

“Don’t go mute now.”

“What do you want me to say? You seem to have it all figured out.”

“Try the truth.”

“Which is what?”

“That your heart’s been occupied for the past twenty years by a six-foot-five billionaire who carries your favorite coffee order in his phone and shows up at every one of your exhibitions.”

“He doesn’t show up at every?—”

“The student showcase last spring? He flew back early from Dubai. The contemporary artists’ panel in July? Rescheduled a hotel opening. That disaster of a pop-up gallery in August? He stayed the whole night, helping you salvage what you could.”

“That’s just Tyson being Tyson.”

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“No, that’s Tyson being in love with you.” She leaned back, crossing her arms. “The question is, what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.” I drained my glass. “If he wanted me, he would’ve said something by now. It’s been years. I don’t think he wants to risk our friendship. Or maybe he’s just not interested in the way that you think.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. And neither do you.”

“Says you.”

“Girl, you are crazy. What could go wrong?”

“He’s everything, Tish. He’s my safe place, my biggest supporter, my partner in crime. It would devastate us if we tried for more and it didn’t work.”

“And if it did work?”

Her words floated in the air like a haunting symphony. I remembered waking up beside him last week, how right it felt to be in his arms, how his touch still burned on my skin, and how twenty years of friendship hadn’t dimmed our energy but ignited us.

“You should have seen Victoria Maples flirting with him,” I said instead. “She practically asked him out during the interview.”

“And?”

“And nothing. He barely noticed.”

“Because he was too busy looking at you.” Latisha signaled for another round. “You know what the best part of working at the Institute is?”

“The art?”

“The stories. Every piece tells one - about passion, about courage, about love. And honey, the story you and Tyson are writing is a masterpiece in the making.”

“Or a tragedy.”

“Only if you let it be.” She accepted fresh glasses from the server. “You want to know what I think?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Nope.” She clinked her glass against mine. “I think you’re scared. Not of losing him, but of admitting how much you want him. Because once you do?—”

“Everything changes.”

“Everything already has.” She touched my hand. “The way you’ve been since starting this project together. The light in your eyes when he calls. Baby, that’s not friendship. That’s love.”

“I slept in his arms last week,” I blurted out.

Latisha’s eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“Not like that. I fell asleep at the building, and he took me home. He stayed like we

used to in college.” I spaced out for a long moment. “The next morning, watching him sleep... I wanted...” I sighed. “Everything.”

The admission felt like jumping off a cliff. “But he’s built this amazing life. He has this empire. What if I mess it all up?”

She squeezed my fingers. “That man built a whole art center because you once mentioned wanting to help young artists. Imagine what he’d build if you actually let him love you.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It could be.” She sat back. “He grounds you. Challenges you. Supports you. And you do the same for him.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I saw him yesterday when he surprised you with lunch. The great Tyson Benefield, who makes CEOs nervous, was grinning like a teenager just because you liked the soup he brought.”

I smiled, remembering. He’d driven across town to get my favorite tomato bisque from that tiny cafe we’d discovered in college.

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“But I mean, if you want Marcus instead, be my guest, just let me know so I know who to shoot my shot at.”

I gasped, and she laughed.

“Don’t be surprised. I need me a strong Mandingo, wealthy, warrior too. You can’t have ‘em’ all, shit.”

I laughed and shook my head.

“Tell me something,” she said, reigning in her mirth. “When you imagine your future - your dreams coming true, your life exactly how you want it - who’s standing beside you?”

The answer came instantly, without thought: Tyson. It had always been Tyson.

“Mmhmm. You don’t have to say it out loud because I know the answer. The question was for you to realize it, too.” Latisha gathered her purse. “Now, I gotta go.” She took a last swig of her wine. “Talk to you later, ya hear!”

I watched her walk away, her words echoing in my head, but I knew I wouldn’t make the first move. It couldn’t be me. If Tyson wanted more than friendship, he would have to tell me. And to be honest, I was worn down waiting to see if anything would come of us. I wanted to fall in love. Maybe Marcus had been sent for that reason and perhaps Tyson and I, weren’t meant to be.

Tyson

“You could’ve sent movers over here,” LaMont said, hefting another box onto the dolly. “Several, actually. Yet here you are, hauling my stuff up three flights of stairs.”

I grabbed two boxes and stacked them on top of each other. “What kind of friend would I be if I sent strangers to do this?”

“A smart one.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The late afternoon heat had us both drenched, our t-shirts clinging to our skin. “At least tell me you hired people for the furniture.”

“Already taken care of. The truck arrives at six.” I headed for the stairs, careful not to bang the boxes against the walls. “Besides, manual labor keeps me humble.”

LaMont’s laugh echoed through the stairwell. “Man, there’s nothing humble about those designer sneakers you wear to move boxes.”

I glanced down at my limited edition Jordans. “These are my work shoes.”

“Those cost more than my first car.”

“Your first car was a ‘92 Civic with no AC. That’s not saying much.”

We reached his new apartment, and I set the boxes in what would become his home office. The space was twice the size of his old place, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Lake Michigan. LaMont had finally let me talk him into upgrading, though he’d insisted on finding the place himself.

“Water break,” he announced, pulling two bottles from a cooler. He tossed one to me, and I caught it one-handed, and drained half the bottle in one gulp.

LaMont settled onto a stack of boxes. “Are you still hitting the gym five days a week?”

“Seven,” I corrected, stretching my shoulders. “Plus boxing with Coach Martinez on Sundays.”

He shook his head. “I guess you need to stay in shape to keep up with all those society parties and magazine shoots.”

“Don’t remind me.” I’d done three interviews this week alone. “The press attention since announcing the Benefield Project has been intense.”

“That’s what happens when Chicago’s most eligible bachelor decides to revolutionize the art scene.” LaMont’s eyes narrowed. “How’s Autumn?”

I focused on removing the cap from another water bottle. “She’s good. Busy with the project.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Come on, T. I saw those photos from the Art & Design interview. You two looked ready to jump each other right there in the gallery.”

“It wasn’t like that.” I thought about how Autumn had felt pressed against me during those shots, how her perfume had clouded my senses.

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“It’s always ‘not like that’ with you two.” LaMont stood, stretching his back.
“Twenty years of ‘not like that.’”

“She went on a date with Marcus Richardson.”

“The lawyer?” LaMont’s eyebrows shot up. “From Caldwell & Ross?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn.” He studied my face. “How are you handling that?”

“I’m not handling anything. She’s free to date whoever she wants.”

“Right. That’s why you’re crushing that water bottle.”

I looked down at the crumpled plastic in my hand. “We should get back to work.”

“Nah.” LaMont blocked my path. “We’re doing this. You’ve been off since that night at the building. What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” But I couldn’t meet his eyes.

“T.”

I sighed, dropping onto a box. “I stayed over last week.”

“For real?”

“Not like that. We were working late, and she fell asleep. I took her home.” I sucked my teeth. “Ended up staying the night.”

“And?”

“And nothing. We slept. Like we used to in college.”

LaMont’s laugh was short and sharp. “Because that worked out so well back then. How many nights did you lie there wanting to kiss her but convinced yourself it wasn’t worth the risk?”

“It wasn’t.”

“Maybe then. But now?” He gestured around the apartment. “Look at everything you’ve built. The empire you’ve created. What are you really afraid of?”

I stood, needing to move. “You don’t get it. She’s not just some woman I’m attracted to. She’s...” I struggled to find the words. “She’s Autumn.”

“Exactly. She’s Autumn. The woman who’s been by your side through everything. Who believed in you when you were just a kid with big dreams and an old camera.”

“That’s why I can’t lose her.” The words came out rougher than intended. “If we tried and it didn’t work...”

“Are you kidding me? What reason would it not work? It’s already worked. You guys are in a relationship without sex. Your best friends, full of emotional love and care, and possess everything that makes a great couple. Spare me the bullshit, please.”

I thought about waking up with her in my arms last week, how right it had felt. How watching her walk away with Marcus felt like someone punching me in the gut.

“Here.” LaMont tossed me another water. “Hydrate and talk. When did it start?”

“What?”

“When did you first realize you were in love with her?”

I didn’t bother denying it. LaMont had known me too long.

I twisted the cap off the bottle. “We were at that dive bar near campus. Some guy was hitting on her and wouldn’t take no for an answer. She handled it herself—told him off so smoothly that he actually apologized before leaving.”

“And?”

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“And I realized I’d never seen anything more attractive than her standing there, five-foot-seven in heels, making this six-foot frat boy stammer like a kid.” I smiled at the memory. “Then she turned to me, wild-haired and triumphant, and said, ‘Your turn to buy shots.’”

“That’s when you knew?”

“That’s when I admitted it to myself. But looking back?” I shrugged. “Probably since high school.”

LaMont whistled low. “All these years...”

“Yeah.”

“And now she’s dating Marcus Richardson.”

“It was one date,” I mumbled. “One date too many, from where I’m sitting.”

I shifted my focus to moving more boxes to the kitchen.

“You know what your problem is?” LaMont followed me, his footsteps heavy on the hardwood floors. “You’re so used to controlling everything. Your hotels, your image, your empire. But this you can’t control, so you do nothing instead of taking action.”

He started unpacking dishes, the ceramic clinking as he set them on the counters.

“What do you want me to do? Tell her I’ve been in love with her since we were kids?”

Risk everything we've built?"

"Yes!" LaMont slammed a cabinet door. "Because right now, you're risking losing her anyway. Do you think Marcus Richardson will be the last guy to see how amazing she is? Who will want to give her everything you're too scared to offer?"

His words hit like a physical blow. I gripped the counter, the marble cold under my palms.

"Look," LaMont's voice softened. "I've watched you build this empire. Turn one hotel into a global brand. You take bigger risks before breakfast than most people do in a lifetime. But with Autumn? You play it safe."

"It's different."

"Why?"

"Because she matters more." The truth of it resonated in my chest. "Everything else - the hotels, the money, all of it - I could lose it tomorrow and rebuild. But her? If I lost her..."

"Then don't lose her." LaMont pulled two beers from the cooler and handed me one. "But man, watching her walk away because you were too afraid to try? That's gonna hurt worse than any failed attempt."

I took a long drink, letting the cold beer wash down my throat. "She deserves better than attempts."

"She deserves the truth." LaMont leaned against the counter. "And the truth is, you're it for her, too."

“You don’t know that.”

“Actually, I do.” He popped the top off another beer. “Remember last Christmas? At the company party?”

I nodded. The event had been spectacular - I’d transformed the Benefield Chicago’s ballroom into a winter wonderland.

“You were working the room, doing your CEO thing. Autumn was by the bar with Angela, talking about you. Not knowing I could hear them.”

My heart rate kicked up. “And what did you hear?”

“Angela asked why you two never got together. Autumn said she couldn’t imagine her life without you in it. That you were her constant, her safe place.” LaMont took another drink. “Then Angela asked what she’d do if you dated someone else. You know what Autumn said?”

I stared at him.

“Nothing. But man, the look on her face?” LaMont set his beer down. “It was like existential dread. That’s when I knew. She loves you just as much as you love her. She’s just as scared of losing you as you are of losing her.”

The furniture truck arrived before I could respond. For the next hour, we directed movers and arranged LaMont’s living room. But his words remained at the forefront of my mind.

When the sky darkened outside, LaMont ordered pizza. We sat on his new couch, surrounded by boxes, and demolished two large pies.

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“You know what Rose would say about all this?” LaMont asked, reaching for another slice.

“That I’m being stupid?”

“That life’s too short for maybes.” He pointed the pizza at me. “Your grandmother didn’t raise no coward, T.”

“No, she didn’t.” I stood, gathering empty boxes. “I should head out. Sunday dinner starts at six, and she’ll kill me if I’m late.”

“Autumn going?”

“She always does.”

LaMont smiled. “Then maybe it’s time to give my grandmother-in-law something new to cook for.”

I threw a wadded-up napkin at his head. “You’re not helpful.”

“I’m very helpful. I just helped you move all my crap up three flights of stairs.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I grabbed my keys. “You good here?”

“I’m good.” He caught my arm as I passed. “But T? Don’t wait too long. Marcus Richardson might have only had one date with her, but I guarantee he’s planning the second. And the third. And every date after that until she forgets she ever wanted

you.”

The thought of Autumn with Marcus - or anyone else - made my chest tight. “I hear you.”

“Do you? Because I’m tired of watching my best friend torture himself over something that could make him happier than all his billions combined.”

I left LaMont’s new place with his words ringing in my ears, my mind already on Sunday dinner at Rose’s. On Autumn’s laugh, mixing with the jazz music Rose always played while cooking, she’d probably wear that green sweater that brought out the gold in her eyes.

Maybe LaMont was right. Perhaps it was time to stop playing it safe.

But first, I had to figure out how to tell my best friend I’d been in love with her for twenty years without destroying everything we’d built.

Chapter 9

Tyson

Pearl’s wrapped itself in Christmas magic. Garlands draped the windows, twinkling white lights lined the ceiling and the scent of Rose’s famous sweet potato pie mixed with pine from the decorated tree in the corner. Jazz music flowed through hidden speakers - Nat King Cole singing about chestnuts roasting while my attention was on the fire pit on the back wall.

Warmth rushed over me as I strolled past the entrance. The restaurant stayed closed on Sundays except for family dinner, but tonight, extra chairs crowded the tables. Rose had invited the whole crew—cousins, aunts, uncles, and, of course, Autumn.

She stood at the dessert counter arranging Christmas cookies with my grandmother, her hair pulled back in a loose bun, wearing that green sweater I'd predicted—the one that made her brown skin radiate and brought gold flecks to her brown eyes. My steps faltered. I'd seen Autumn consistently over two decades, and still, the sight of her knocked me sideways.

“There's my boy.” Rose wiped her hands on her apron and came around the counter. I bent down to hug her, and she squeezed me tight. “You're late.”

“By two minutes.”

“Late is late,” she smiled, patting my cheek. “Go help Autumn with those cookies. Lord knows that girl can't bake to save her life.”

“I heard that,” Autumn called over her shoulder. “And I'll have you know these store-bought cookies look amazing on this platter.”

I crossed to her, sliding an arm around her waist and dropping a kiss on her temple. A greeting we'd shared a thousand times, but tonight it felt different. Everything felt different since that morning I'd woken up holding her.

“Need help?” I asked though I kept my arm where it was.

“I need you to tell your grandmother that arranging cookies is a legitimate skill.”

“A vital one,” I agreed solemnly. “Critical to the success of any dinner party.”

She elbowed me in the ribs. “You're supposed to be on my side.”

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“I’m always on your side.” The words came out lower, with an air of sentiment that warmed me from the inside out.

She turned in my arm, looking up at me. “Are you okay?”

“Perfect.” I pinched her chin. “You look beautiful.”

A blush crept across her cheeks. “It’s just a sweater.”

“It’s never just anything with you.”

The moment stretched between us, charged and unfiltered. Then Aunt Marie burst through the kitchen doors with a tray of mac and cheese, and we eased apart.

“Tyson! Come taste this and tell me if it needs more pepper.”

The next hour passed in a blur of family arriving, dishes being passed, and Rose directing traffic like a five-foot-two general. I kept finding reasons to touch Autumn - a hand on her back as we moved chairs, our fingers brushing as we set the table, my knee pressed against hers when we finally sat down.

“Little David,” Uncle Mack pointed his fork at my cousin, “when are you gonna tell your mama about that ticket?”

David choked on his collard greens. At sixteen, he thought he could hide anything from his mother, but news traveled fast in our family.

“What ticket?” Aunt Marie’s head snapped up.

“No ticket,” David said quickly, shooting Uncle Mack a betrayed look.

“The one you got for racing that Honda Civic down Cottage Grove,” Uncle Mack continued, clearly enjoying himself.

“You did what?” Aunt Marie's voice rose an octave.

“In his defense,” I cut in, “that Civic was pretty slow.”

“Don't encourage him!” But Aunt Marie’s lips twitched. “Besides, you were worse at his age with that motorcycle!”

“The one he tried to hide in my garage?” Rose shook her head. “That boy came over every day for two weeks straight to ‘help with the books.’”

“I was being charitable,” I protested.

Autumn snorted. “You were being sneaky. And terrible at it. Your shirt ripped when it was caught on the handlebar.” She shook her head and tsked.

“And he tried to convince me he’d torn it playing basketball,” Rose cackled.

“The boy was wearing dress shoes!” Uncle Mack wiped tears from his eyes.

Laughter cruised around the table as I leaned into their memories of me and my motorcycle, but at the other end of the table, my cousin mouthed, “Thank you,” and I winked. I didn'tmind taking the attention off him. I knew all too well how it felt to be under the gun. But I didn’t miss Uncle Mack’s yelp when David kicked him under the table and mumbled something unintelligible.

“Autumn, baby,” Aunt Marie said once everyone had filled their plates, “how’s your love life? Any special men I should know about?”

“Marie,” Rose warned, but Autumn laughed.

“Actually, I had dinner with someone a few weeks ago. A lawyer named Marcus.”

My fork scraped against my plate. The entire table went quiet.

“A lawyer?” Uncle Mack raised his eyebrows. “Well, well.”

“It was just dinner,” Autumn said quickly. “Though he did ask me out again.”

“And?” Rose asked.

“And... I haven’t answered yet.”

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I stared at my plate, remembering LaMont's words about Marcus planning that second date. About Autumn forgetting she ever wanted me, and I tried not to swear.

"Why haven't you answered?" Aunt Marie pressed.

Autumn shifted in her chair. "It's been a whirlwind of activity with the Benefield Project, so I've had no time to think about it. Marcus is nice, successful, and does great work in the community. I'll respond soon enough."

"He sounds like a great guy," Aunt Marie said, laying it on thick.

"He's... nice," Autumn repeated.

Rose sat her fork down. "Nice is good — if you're talking about banana pudding."

The table erupted in laughter. I glanced at Autumn and caught her already looking at me.

"I'm just messing with you, dear," Rose stood. "Tyson, can you help me get dessert?"

I followed her into the kitchen, where she rounded on me the moment the door swung shut.

"Twenty years," she said, hands on her hips. "Twenty years I've watched you love that girl. And now some lawyer in a fancy suit is gonna swoop in because you're too scared to speak up?"

“Grandma—”

“Don’t you ‘Grandma’ me. That girl belongs at this table - not as your friend, but as your everything. And you belong with her. So, when are you going to stop this charade?”

I leaned against the counter. “I can’t risk losing her.”

“You’ll lose her anyway if you don’t get your act together.” She pulled a pie from the warmer. “Now take this out there and figure out how to keep that chair next to yours filled with the right person.”

“Can I say something?”

She folded her arms, and I smirked.

“I know you love your restaurant and it’s the heart of this town, but at any time when you are ready to retire – rest. You don’t need to work another day in your life.”

Her face softened and she reached out and cupped my cheek.

“I know that baby. How many times are you going to tell me I’ll be taken care of?”

“As many times as it takes. I don’t want you on your feet forever.”

“And I won’t be. But for now, I love this space and the joy my food brings to people. Trust me, you’ll be the first to know when I’m ready to sit down.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll allow it,” I teased.

She smirked and pushed me out of the kitchen.

When I returned, Autumn had moved to the window seat - her favorite spot. The Christmas lights cast patterns across her face as she stared at the snowy street.

“Hey,” I said, sitting beside her. “It’s my turn to ask you, are you okay?”

A small smile quirked the corners of her lips. “I’m just thinking.”

“About?”

She turned to me. “The first time I came to Sunday dinner.”

I smirked. “Sophomore year of high school. You were wearing overalls and had paint in your hair.”

“You remember what I was wearing?”

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I remembered everything about her. “I do. Rose took one look at you and said?—”

“Finally, someone to appreciate my sweet potato pie properly,” Autumn mimicked. “I’ve never missed a Sunday since.”

“Because of the pie?”

“Because of this,” she gestured around the room. “The family, the love, the way Rose treats me like I’m hers,” she paused. “The way you’ve always made sure I belonged.”

My hand covered hers, our fingers intertwining. “You do belong, Autumn. Then and now. With all of us. With me.”

She met my eyes, and something heartfelt passed between us. “Ty...”

“Come with me,” I stood, pulling her up. “I want to show you something.”

I led her through the kitchen to the back office, where Rose did the books, and I’d learned to count money as a kid. Christmas lights were here, too, strung around the window frame.

“What—” Autumn started, but I turned, backed her against the desk, and gripped her neck, crushing my mouth into hers. For all the resolve I had, I’d grown tired of my own excuses. My tongue parted her lips, and twenty years of yearning poured into our mouths’ caress.

And she kissed me back.

Her hands slid up my chest to my shoulders as my tongue swept across her tongue. She tasted like Rose's sweet tea. I lifted her onto the desk, stepping between her thighs, one hand tangled in her hair while the other gripped her hip. I ached with need, and fire grew inside me as our kiss deepened and became hungrier.

Autumn made a small sound in the back of her throat that nearly broke my control. I kissed down her neck, breathing in the floral scent of her skin.

"Ty," she purred, "what are we?—"

The door opened. "There you two are, I need help with the— oh!" Rose stopped short, then smiled wide. "Never mind. Take your time."

She backed out, closing the door behind her, but the moment had shifted. Autumn pressed her forehead to my chest, breathing hard.

"That was..."

"Intense," I finished. "Sorry for the interruption."

She laughed shakily. "Maybe it's a sign."

"The only sign is that I should've done that years ago." I tilted her chin up. "Autumn?—"

"There's Marcus," she whispered.

"There's us," I countered. "There's always been us."

Voices in the kitchen reminded us where we were. Autumn slid off the desk, her body dragging against mine, causing sparks to flame my libido. She straightened her

sweater with trembling hands.

“I should,” she gestured vaguely at the door. “Uh.”

“We should talk about this.”

“I know,” she touched her lips, still swollen from my kiss. “But not here. Not now.”

I caught her hand before she could leave. “Promise me something?”

“What?”

“Don’t say yes to that second date. Not until we talk.”

She stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. “Okay.”

I watched her slip back into the kitchen, my body still humming from her touch. Through the door, I heard Rose’s laugh, Autumn’s voice joining in, and the sounds of my family—our family—enjoying their Sunday together.

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I'd spent twenty years convinced I couldn't risk our friendship for something more. But standing there with the taste of her still on my lips, I realized the real risk was letting her go.

It was time to show Autumn exactly what she meant to me. What she'd always meant to me.

And I wanted to do it before Christmas.

Chapter 10

Autumn

I was still absorbed in that kiss.

A week had passed, and my lips remembered the pressure of Tyson's mouth, the heat of his breath against my neck, and the strength of his hands gripping my hips as he lifted me onto Rose's desk. Every quiet moment brought the memories flooding back - the way he pressed between my thighs, how his fingers had tangled in my hair, the deep groan that rumbled through his chest when I kissed him back.

"Ms. Williams?"

I blinked, focusing on the intern standing in my office doorway. "Yes, Sophie?"

"Mr. Richardson is here for the meeting about Denise Jordan's work."

Right. The meeting. I smoothed my silk blouse and checked my reflection on my phone screen. “Please send him in.”

Marcus entered with his usual polished confidence, wearing a perfectly tailored gray suit that emphasized his broad shoulders. Under different circumstances, I might have appreciated how handsome he looked. But now all I could think was that his height didn’t quite match Tyson’s, his smile didn’t make my heart race, and his presence didn’t fill the room the same way.

“Autumn.” He extended a thick folder. “I brought Denise’s portfolio and the contract details.”

“Thank you.” I gestured to the chair across from my desk. “How is she?”

“Excited. Nervous.” He sat, adjusting his tie. “She can’t quite believe her work might be featured in the Benefield.”

When I opened the portfolio, Denise’s raw talent leaped from every page. Her murals captured the South Side with unflinching honesty—children playing amid urban decay, grandmothers tending community gardens, teenagers dancing on broken concrete.

“These are extraordinary,” I said, studying a piece that showed an elderly man teaching chess to neighborhood kids. “The way she uses color...”

“Wait until you see this one.” Marcus leaned forward, flipping to a larger work. “She painted this after winning the copyright case.”

The mural showed a young girl holding a paintbrush like a sword, facing down a wall of corporate logos. Hope and defiance radiated from every brushstroke.

“This is exactly what the Benefield Project needs.” I made notes on my tablet. “Raw truth balanced with optimism.”

“About the project,” Marcus pulled out another folder, “I drafted some preliminary contracts for the student artists.”

Our fingers brushed as he handed me the papers. A week ago, that slight contact might have sparked something. Now, it just reminded me how different it felt when Tyson touched me.

“The terms look good,” I said, scanning the documents. “Very artist friendly.”

“I modeled them after agreements I’ve used for other emerging artists. Full creative control, fair compensation, future rights protection.” He shifted in his chair. “I wanted to ensure they’re protected while still meeting the Benefield’s needs.”

I nodded, making more notes. “Tyson will appreciate that. He’s adamant about treating the artists well.”

“Tyson seems adamant about a lot of things.” Marcus’s tone carried an edge. “Including how the project is managed.”

I looked up, catching his meaning. “He built this empire from nothing. He’s earned the right to have high standards.”

“Of course,” Marcus studied me. “You defend him quickly.”

“I state facts quickly. There’s a difference.”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Fair enough. Though I must admit, I’m curious about something.”

“What’s that?”

“Why haven’t you answered about that second date?”

My pen stilled on the contract. “Marcus...”

“Is it because of him?”

“It’s complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” He sat forward. “I like you, Autumn. I think we could be good together. Simple, straightforward.”

“You’re right - it could be simple,” I met his eyes. “Which is why I need to be honest with you. You’re an incredible man, Marcus. Any woman would be lucky to have you. But my heart isn’t available. So unless you want to be friends, I’m unsure where a second date would take us.”

He nodded slowly. “I suspected as much, but a man can hope, can’t he?” A small smile touched his lips.

“I suppose so. What exactly were you hoping for?”

“Something more than friendship. And I still do. It’s okay if your heart is not available now. Who knows what the future holds?”

I stared at him and tried to figure out how to let him know that my heart would never

be available to him. But was that true? Sure, something was going on beyond the scope of friendship between me and Tyson that needed to be addressed. But that certainly didn't mean my heart would never be available to others. Tyson and I had yet to confirm or deny anything. Maybe I was getting ahead of myself. And with that in mind, I smiled, nodded, and didn't offer a rebuttal.

Marcus gathered the contracts with careful movements, stood, and adjusted his cuffs. "I'll have my team revise these contracts and send them over tomorrow. We should still work together on this - the artists deserve our best efforts."

"I'd like that." I walked him to the door. "Thank you for understanding."

After Marcus left, I returned to the pile of work on my desk, but Denise's artwork kept drawing my attention. Her pieces deserved careful consideration for placement in the Benefield. I checked my watch—it was just past four. I could head over to the building and start mapping out where each piece might go.

My phone buzzed with a text.

Tyson: "I'm working late at the building tonight and need your help with some things. Are you available?"

My pulse quickened as I typed back: "I plan to come by. I need to work on placement for Denise's pieces."

Tyson: "Great minds. I'll bring dinner."

I gathered Denise's portfolio and my notes, trying to focus on the professional aspects of the evening ahead. But my mind kept drifting to Sunday night, to that kiss, to the way Tyson's hands had felt on my body.

I told myself tonight would be about work, about the project, and about the artists who counted on us.

But as I packed my bag, I let my hair down from its tight bun and reapplied my lipstick internally, hoping for more.

Chapter 11

Autumn

The Benefield Building was quiet in the early evening. Most of the construction crews were gone for the day. I used my key card to enter through the side door, my heels clicking against the marble floors as I made my way to the main gallery space. The renovations were nearly complete here - crown molding gleamed against fresh paint, and track lighting cast warm pools across the walls.

I spread Denise's portfolio across a worktable, losing myself in the stories she told. This piece would draw people in from the street. That one would make them pause on their way to the elevator. Another would remind them of home as they returned from a long day.

"Beautiful work."

I didn't turn at the sound of Tyson's voice. I'd known he was there - had felt his presence the moment he entered the room. "She's incredible. Raw talent like this needs to be seen."

His footsteps drew closer, and warmth crept up my back. "Like someone else I know."

Now I did turn. He'd changed from his usual suit into dark jeans and a black sweater

that emphasized every sculpted inch of his six-foot-five frame. He carried takeout bags that filled the air with the scent of Thai food.

“Hungry?” he asked.

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“Starving.” I helped him clear space on the table. “You didn’t have to bring dinner, you know.”

“Yes, I did.” He unpacked containers of pad thai and green curry. “Because I know you, and I know you haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

He wasn’t wrong. We settled into our usual rhythm, passing containers back and forth, stealing bites from each other’s plates. But underneath the familiar comfort grew a gently growing fire. Every accidental touch transported me back to the kiss. Every look lasted a heartbeat longer than usual.

“Tell me about the artwork,” he said, reaching for more rice.

I walked him through Denise’s portfolio, explaining my vision for each piece. He asked thoughtful questions and offered suggestions, but I could feel his attention split between the art and me.

“This one,” I pointed to the girl with the paintbrush, “should go in the lobby. It captures everything we’re trying to do here.”

“Fighting against expectations.” His voice carried layers of meaning. “Standing up for what you want.”

I met his eyes. “Something like that.”

He set down his fork. “We should talk about last Sunday night.”

“Should we?”

“Don’t do that.” He moved around the table toward me. “Don’t pretend it didn’t mean anything.”

“I’m not.” I forced myself to hold his gaze. “But you’ve spent a week not calling, not bringing it up until now.”

“Because I needed to be sure.” He stopped in front of me, close enough that I had to tilt my head back to see his face. “Sure that I wasn’t imagining twenty years of wanting you. Sure that when I kissed you, you kissed me back because you wanted me, not because you were caught up in the moment.”

“And now?”

“Now, I’m sure.” His hand came up to cup my face. “I’ve been in love with you since we were kids. Every woman I’ve dated was a placeholder because they weren’t you, and I’m tired of pretending I don’t want to kiss you every time you walk into a room.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. “Tyson...”

“Tell me you don’t feel it, too.” His thumb brushed my cheek. “Tell me I’m wrong, and I’ll walk away. We can be friends and pretend that’s enough.”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve been in love with you for so long, I don’t remember what it feels like not to want you.” The words rushed out, unstoppable. “Because every time you touch

me, my whole body comes alive. Because you're the first person I want to talk to every morning and the last voice I want to hear every night."

His other hand gripped my hip, pulling me closer. "Say it again."

"Which part?"

"The part about being in love with me."

I slid my hands up his chest, feeling his heart race under my palms. "I'm in love with you, Tyson. I always have been."

He groaned, deep and raw. I felt the grip of his fingers at the back of my neck, then his mouth crashed into mine with uninhibited desire. As hot as the kiss was last Sunday - this one was scorching, sending my body's nerves whacking all over, my pussy thumping, my nipples hard. This was unadulterated fire, and I moaned in his mouth when his tongue swept past my lips as he lifted me onto the table, scattering artwork everywhere. I didn't care. All that mattered was getting closer and being claimed by him for every second we breathed together.

My legs wrapped around his waist as his hands seeped in my hair. He tasted like spices and peppermint, and every dream I'd ever had about us came slamming into me in this intense, upsurging moment. I tugged his sweater up, needing to feel his skin against mine.

Tyson broke the kiss long enough to pull the sweater over his head, and I ran my hands over the ridges of his abs and the broad plane of his chest. His muscles jumped under my touch. And I reveled at the impact my caress had on him.

"You're so fine," I whispered, tracing the tattoo on his ribs.

“And you’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever known,” he nibbled at my neck, his hands working the buttons of my blouse. “Do you know how many times I’ve dreamed about this? About touching you, tasting you?”

“Show me.”

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His growl pushed into the back of my throat as he kissed me with fervor, pulling my blouse off my shoulders. Tyson's mouth tracked hot kisses down my neck, across my collarbone. "I want to take my time with you. Learn every inch. Make you forget anyone else ever touched you."

"We have all night," I arched into him as his hands found bare skin. "And tomorrow. And every day after that."

He pulled back, his dark eyes intense. "Say that again."

"Every day, Ty." I framed his face in my hands. "I'm done pretending I don't want forever with you."

Something fierce and tender crossed his face. Then he kissed me again, pouring love, want, and need into our connection. My blouse hit the floor, followed by his belt. Each piece of clothing removed felt like stepping closer to something inevitable.

"Wait," he said against my mouth. "Not here. Not like this."

"Why not?"

"Because the first time I make love to you isn't going to be on a table." He stepped back, chest heaving. "Come home with me."

I slid off the table on shaky legs. "Tyson..."

"I want to do this right." He grabbed our clothes, helping me back into my blouse. "I

want to take you to dinner properly. Court you the way you deserve.”

“We’ve had twenty years of dinners.” I caught his hand. “Twenty years of friendship and trust and building something real. I don’t need courting. I just need you.”

He pressed his forehead to mine. “Are you sure? Because once we cross this line…”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.” I kissed him softly. “Take me home.”

Chapter 12

Autumn

The drive to his penthouse passed in charged hunger; his hand was steady on my thigh while mine rubbed his thigh, grabbed at his belt, and slipped between his legs to grip the log in his pants. His gaze lowered on me, a warning of caution as desire whirled in his soul. I was needy, and it was all I could do to keep from jumping into his lap and causing a scene on the highway.

In the elevator, he pressed me against the wall, stealing kisses that left me dizzy and yearning for his thrusts. By the time we reached his door, we were both breathing hard.

Tyson carried me across the threshold, somehow maintaining composure but clearly on the edge of his passion for me. “Are you still sure?”

I answered by pulling his mouth into mine for another hungry, heart-throbbing kiss, and he responded with the type of want I’d dreamed of receiving from him. Our clothes flew desperately, and he slowed long enough to drink in the sight of me. I bit my bottom lip, watching his irises darken each time they landed on another part of my skin. At my breasts, a guttural sound drifted from him, and I wound my hips,

unable to wait patiently any longer.

“Give it to me, Tyson.”

His gaze drove back to mine, and his long strides carried us across the room where my back was pinned to the wall. Tyson entered me in one driving, deep thrust, tearing a gasp from my mouth, my eyes widening, and my heart ricocheting at his intense intrusion.

“Ooooooh, my God.”

I moaned with the voice notes of an opera singer, followed by a hiss as my pussy squeezed his dick in response to his impalement.

“Have mercy!” I shouted. My fingers gripped his shoulders, my nails embedded in his muscular flesh.

“We can’t go back,” he murmured against my chin, peppering kisses there as if to soothe me from the onslaught of his rocking pleasure. “I can’t let you go now. I can’t...”

He pulled out and drove in repeatedly, pushing a hard stroke with each new plummet. The walls drummed at the force of his power, and my skin burned from the whips of our flesh.

“Aaaaah, Tyson!”

“Tell me you don’t want to go back.”

I shook my head as he fucked me hard. “I don’t. I don’t. I don’t! Ooou!”

“Promise me, baby.” He dug into me. “I want everything from you.” He added angled thrusts that made my eyes roll and my ears pop. “I want your friendship, your heart, your love, and this pussy.”

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“Yes! Yes! Yeeeeesss.”

“Tell me that’s what you want.”

“Tyson!”

“Tell me,” his voice dropped to a nocturnal sound I’d never heard before. I drenched his dick, squirting so hard screams tore from my throat.

I squealed and confessed. “Shit! Shit! Oh! Tyson! I want you like this as long as you’ll have me.”

His hips pumped with pressurized madness, and my toes curled as he bit into my neck.

“Ooooh! Yes! Fuck me, baby.”

Our skin slapped repeatedly, and Tyson made it his business to drive inside me like he was digging for buried treasure. The foundation shook from his pounding, and I didn’t give a damn if we would be buried under rubble because of his thrusts. I only wanted to be pounded by his merciless strokes until we fell apart.

“Come again,” he commanded, and my pussy drenched him again as if he was her commander-in-chief.

“OH!” I shut my eyes tight as my orgasm spilled, and my ears rang from high elevation.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he growled. “This pussy is so wet. I didn’t know you had that wap, girl.”

I burst into laughter on a moan. It was the most tinkling sound I’d ever given, but it must have made him hornier because he yanked me away from the wall, carried me to the bed, and fucked me into the mattress.

“Oh! Tyson!”

He slurped my nipples into his mouth, grinding into me as he planted heavy kisses on my chest, bit into my neck, and gobbled up my lips. I drowned in his intimate pleasure, revered it, and welcomed the way he filled my body with love. It was a hungry undertaking that I never imagined I’d experience. Not with him - not with anyone.

“I’m so fucking starved for you,” he said, sucking my tongue. “I’m never letting you go.” Tears filled my eyes. My heart was full, and I couldn’t believe this was real. “You understand me, Autumn. You’re mine.” He kissed my lips. “Mine.” He gripped my neck, withdrew his dick, and popped my pussy back to back with lashing stings from his heavy dick. “Come for me again.”

I soaked us, my body trembling in a chaotic avalanche of orgasms.

“Yes, that’s my baby.”

He drove back inside as I continued erupting and fucked me until he came.

“Fuck!” The deep sound of his voice made me tremble as passion ignited between us. Where you thought we would surely be slowing down, this raw, untamed sex only made us go harder.

And to prove it, Tyson flipped me and drove into me from behind.

Chapter 13

Tyson

Snow drifted past the windows as I watched Autumn sleep. Her curves pressed against my silk sheets, dark hair spilling across my pillows, lips slightly parted. Decades of wanting her had culminated in a night that exceeded every fantasy. My fingers traced her spine, thinking about how she'd arched under my touch, how she'd called my name, how perfectly we'd fit together.

She stirred, stretching like a cat before rolling to face me. "Good morning."

"Good morning, beautiful." I brushed hair from her face. "Sleep well?"

"Mmhmm. When you finally let me sleep." Her hand slid up my chest. "What time is it?"

"Early. We have a few hours before we need to be at the Benefield." I pulled her closer, kissing her neck. "A few hours to make up for lost time."

"Then we better get started."

I rolled her under me, claiming her mouth as my hands mapped her body. She responded eagerly, wrapping her legs around my waist. Every touch and kiss felt familiar and thrillingly new - like coming home to a place I'd only dreamed about.

Being inside her cocooned us into one organism. Her pleasure ignited my drive, and I pushed in and out of Autumn, slow then hard.

“Oh!”

Her trembles made her body quake against us as we merged repeatedly.

“I could do this forever with you.”

She purred. “I’d love that.”

I kissed her mouth, sucked in her tongue, and fucked her until she wailed my name. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard, and I wanted to hear it more.

Later, wrapped in my robe, Autumn meandered through my kitchen, making coffee while Christmas music played softly through hidden speakers. I leaned against the counter, watching her move through my space as if she belonged there—because she did—she always had.

“Your coffee selection is ridiculous,” she said, examining imported bean bags. “How many kinds of Ethiopian roast does one person need?”

“As many as it takes to get Chicago’s finest curator to stay for breakfast.” I wrapped my arms around her waist, nuzzling her neck. “I can think of better ways to convince you, however.”

She turned in my arms. “We need to be at the Benefield in two hours.”

“Plenty of time.” My hands slipped under her - my - robe.

“Tyson...” But she was already melting against me.

“Yes?” I lifted her onto the counter.

“The coffee will get cold.”

“I’ll make you more.” I untied her robe. “I’ll make you anything you want for as long as you want it.”

Her hands cruised across my head. “You promise?”

Our gazes held, and I caught the deeper meaning in her eyes. “Yes, Autumn. I promise. Do you believe me?”

She pulled me into a heated kiss. “Yes.”

We barely made it to the Benefield on time.

The building hummed with pre-launch energy. Christmas decorations mixed with gallery preparations - garlands wound around light fixtures and ornaments hung between newly mounted paintings. Autumn moved through the space with laser focus, directing installations and adjusting lighting.

“The Denise Jordan series needs more space,” she called to a crew member. “Let’s move it three inches left.”

I stood back, watching her work. She’d changed into a cream sweater dress that hugged her curves, but she still wore my watch - the one she’d grabbed from my nightstand this morning. The sight of it on her wrist did things to my heart.

“There you are!” Rose’s voice carried across the gallery. “I brought hot chocolate

since you missed breakfast at Pearl's."

She appeared with a thermos and three mugs, her red Christmas sweater dotted with tiny bells that jingled as she walked. But she stopped short, looking between Autumn and me.

"Well, well." A smile spread across her face. "Finally."

"Finally, what?" But I couldn't hide my grin.

"Don't play with me, boy. I've been cooking Sunday dinner for years, watching you two dance around each other." She set down the thermos. "Something's different today."

Autumn came over, and I pulled her against my side. We're not hiding. Or pretending.

"About time!" Rose clapped her hands. "Now, tell me everything. When did this happen? Who made the first move? Did you?—"

"Grandma," but I was laughing.

"Don't you 'Grandma' me. I've earned this moment." She poured hot chocolate, adding extra marshmallows to Autumn's mug - just like she had since high school. "My two stubborn children finally figured it out."

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“Your two stubborn children have work to do,” Autumn said, but she was smiling, too. “The launch is in two weeks.”

“And it’ll be Christmas Eve,” I added. I turned to Rose. “We’re adding something special to the program. I need your help with the details.”

Rose’s eyes lit up. “What kind of something special?”

I outlined my plan while Autumn directed another installation across the room. By the time I finished, Rose was wiping tears.

“That girl deserves every bit of this,” she said. “And you, my sweet boy, deserve her.”

“I know.” I watched Autumn adjust a painting’s angle, totally in her element. “I’ve always known.”

“Then why did it take you so long to do something about it?”

“Because I was afraid of losing her.” I sipped my chocolate. “Now I’m more afraid of not giving her everything she deserves.”

Rose squeezed my hand. “You already do. You always have.” She gathered her things. “Now, I have a restaurant to run, and you have a gallery to finish. Don’t forget - Christmas Eve dinner after the launch.”

“As if you’d let us forget.”

She kissed my cheek, then Autumn's, leaving us amid the controlled chaos of final preparations. I crossed to where Autumn stood, studying the main gallery wall.

"The light hits it perfectly now," she said without turning. "We should adjust the track lighting for evening viewing."

"Already ordered special spots." I wrapped my arms around her waist. "They'll be here tomorrow."

She leaned back against my chest. "You think of everything."

"I think of you." I pressed a kiss to her neck.

She turned in my arms. "We should talk about this. About us. About what happens next."

"What do you want to happen next?"

"Everything," she traced my jaw with her fingers. "But I don't want to rush."

"It's almost taken us a lifetime. I wouldn't call what we're doing rushing." I caught her hand, kissing her palm. "Besides, I'm done waiting."

"Me, too," she said softly. "But we should still take it slow and maybe figure out how to be us without pressure."

I watched her for a long time when her eyes turned up at me.

"What?"

"Do you feel pressured to be with me, Autumn?"

Her eyes widened. “No! Why would you ask that?”

I glanced back at the painting before us. “I just wanted to make sure.”

Her eyes lingered on me, and she faced me, pulling my gaze back to hers.

“To be honest, I love what we’ve found. I don’t want to rush, not because of me but because of you.”

Surprised, I arched a brow. “Why do you?—”

“Because you’re such a fuckin’ catch, Ty.”

I wiggled my brows. “I am a catch, aren’t I?”

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She pushed my shoulder, but it didn't move me. I chuckled. "I'm messing with you, beautiful."

Autumn blushed. "I know." Her face turned serious. "But I want us to last. However long that is. I'd hate for you to... to..."

I frowned. "To what?"

She held back her words which made my frown deepen. "Autumn."

"You could have any woman you wanted. You don't think I've seen the way they flirt with you relentlessly? Even that editor, Victoria Maples."

"Okay. What does that have to do with you and me?"

She shrugged, her eyes dropping from mine.

"Autumn, talk to me."

She shook her head. "Nothing. Never mind." She smiled falsely, took her attention across the room, and mumbled, "That needs to be moved. I'll be back."

"Whoa." I grabbed her hand, intertwining our fingers and tugging her back to me. Staring at each other, we stood in silence while everyone bustled around us. I needed to connect with Autumn like this. It was one of the ways I'd gotten her to open up throughout the years.

She sighed. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Me? Why are you doing this to me?”

She smirked. “I said never mind, didn’t I?”

“The problem with that is something is on your heart. Why would you hold it from me?”

She pouted but didn’t respond.

“Is this how it’s going to be? You’re going to hold back from me now? Because if so, maybe?—”

“Don’t say it!”

I shut my mouth, and she gasped and folded her arms. “Were you really going to say it?”

“I don’t know. Were you really going to let me?” I teased, mimicking her folded arms.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

“There’s my girl.” I reached and covered her waist with my arms and drew her close. “Of course, I’m messing with you. I’m not a liar, and I’ve already told you you’re mine.”

She blushed. “Why would you mess with me like that?”

“You know the answer. I need you. All of you. Don’t hold back from me. You never

have. Don't start now. Keeping things out in the open will strengthen our relationship. Isn't that what you want?"

"Yes."

I nodded. "So tell me, what is this never mind about?"

She sighed again. "You've never been in a relationship with me before. What if I get on your nerves quick?"

I twisted my lips. "Woman, you will get on my nerves. I'm sure of it."

She gasped, and I guffawed while she swatted the shit out of me.

"I'm just kidding!" I shouted. "A little bit."

She swatted me more when a voice behind us boasted.

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“Looks like you two are having a great time.”

We both turned at Marcus’s voice, and that annoyance I used to feel was absent.

“Marcus! What are you doing here?” Autumn asked.

He glanced between us as we floated closer together.

“I came to see how Denise’s artwork would be displayed.” He nodded, “Things are looking good.” He looked between us again, and Autumn went mute.

“Things are great, Marcus,” I spoke up. “Denise’s artwork appears several times throughout the building - positioned just right so no one misses a second of her artistry. You can thank my beautiful lady right here. She’s made this all possible.”

His brows stretched, and Autumn looked up at me while I kept my gaze on Marcus.

“Would you like me to show you around?”

He cleared his throat. “No. I think I can manage alone.”

I nodded. “Very well. If you need anything, let me know.”

She turned back to look at him.

“I never had a chance, did I?”

Her mouth parted. “Marcus, I told you my heart wasn’t available.”

He nodded. “You did.” He inhaled a breath. “Okay. I guess that’s it then.”

He scurried away quickly, and I turned and dropped a kiss on Autumn’s forehead. “You told him your heart wasn’t available?”

A smile ushered to her lips. “Yes.”

“When?”

“When I knew it would always be you.”

She grabbed my chin and pulled me to her lips, and I melted into her mouths’ caress.

We spent the rest of the day finalizing details, stealing kisses between decisions, and touching whenever we could. Everything felt different yet exactly right—like the last piece of a puzzle clicking into place.

That night, as snow fell outside my windows and Christmas lights twinkled across the city, I watched Autumn sleep again. But this time, I didn’t have to pretend she wasn’t everything I wanted. This time, I could pull her closer, kiss her awake, and love her the way I’d always dreamed.

This time, I could keep her.

And in two weeks, at the gallery launch, I would show her exactly what that meant.

Chapter 14

Tyson

Christmas Eve

I checked my Rolex for the tenth time in as many minutes. In less than an hour, the Benefield Building would open its doors for the gallery launch. Every detail had been meticulously planned - from the strategic placement of Denise Jordan's cornerstone pieces to the timing of the permanent collection reveal.

"Everything's perfect," Autumn said, appearing beside me. She wore a deep burgundy gown that hugged her curves, her hair swept up to expose her neck. My fingers itched to pull her close, but dozens of staff members bustled around us, making final adjustments to displays and lighting.

"Almost perfect." She straightened my bow tie. "There's still one more surprise."

Her eyes narrowed. "What did you do?"

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“You’ll see.” I kissed her mouth, careful not to smudge her lipstick. “The first guests will arrive soon. Are you ready?”

“No.” She smoothed her dress. “Yes. Maybe.”

I laughed. “Which is it?”

“All of them? This is huge, Ty. What if?—”

“Stop.” I gripped her shoulders. “This night belongs to us and every young artist who deserves their shot.”

She nodded, squaring her shoulders. “You’re right.”

“I usually am.”

She smacked my chest. “And humble, too.”

“Humility is overrated.” I caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. “Now go finish whatever last-minute adjustments you’re pretending not to obsess over. I’ll handle the arrival logistics.”

Within thirty minutes, the space filled with Chicago’s elite, art collectors, critics, and - most importantly - young artists and their families. Champagne flowed as guests moved through the galleries, discussing pieces and placing bids.

I spotted Denise Jordan standing before her signature piece, the girl with the

paintbrush. She twisted her hands together, watching people's reactions.

"How are you holding up?" I asked, joining her.

"Mr. Benefield!" She jumped. "I... this is... I never imagined..."

"You earned this spot." I gestured to the growing crowd around her work. "Every brushstroke."

"Thank you for believing in me. In all of us." She wiped away a tear. "My grandmother's here. She's never seen my work displayed before."

I followed her gaze to an elderly woman in a church hat, beaming with pride as she explained her granddaughter's painting to anyone who would listen.

"Come with me." I led Denise through the crowd. "Mrs. Jordan? I'm Tyson Benefield."

"Lord have mercy, you're even taller in person!" She fanned herself with a program. "Thank you for giving my baby this chance."

"Actually, your granddaughter gave us something." I waved over a staff member. "Show them."

The employee handed me a tablet displaying real-time auction results. Denise gasped when she saw the numbers.

"That's impossible."

"That's what your work is worth." I showed them the mounting bids. "And the night's just getting started."

Mrs. Jordan pulled her granddaughter into a fierce hug while I slipped away, letting them have their moment. More success stories like this would follow, creating opportunities to show these kids they belonged in spaces like this.

Autumn materialized at my side. “Was that happy crying or overwhelmed crying?”

“Both.” I wrapped an arm around her waist. “Like artist, like curator?”

She dabbed at her eyes. “Shut up. I’m just proud of them.”

I nodded toward the entrance where Rose had just arrived, resplendent in royal blue. “Your biggest fan is here.”

Rose made her way to us, stopping every few feet to admire the artwork and chat with guests. By the time she reached us, she’d collected three business cards and promised to cater two events.

“My babies!” She hugged us both. “This place is magnificent! And these young artists - such talent!”

“Wait until you see what’s next,” I said.

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Autumn's head snapped toward me. "There's that 'next' again. What are you planning?"

"Patience." I checked my watch. "It's almost time. Rose, will you help me gather everyone?"

While Rose corralled guests toward the main gallery, I pulled Autumn aside. "Do you trust me?"

"You know I do."

"Then close your eyes."

She hesitated, then complied. I guided her through a set of doors we'd kept locked all day, positioning her just so.

"Keep them closed," I instructed, then addressed the assembled crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us on this special night. The Benefield Project represents nurturing talent, creating opportunities, and honoring those who dedicate their lives to making dreams possible."

I moved behind Autumn, hands on her shoulders. "Open your eyes."

Her lids fluttered open, and she gasped. The previously empty wing had been transformed into a permanent gallery space. Above the entrance, bronze letters spelled out, "The Autumn Williams Permanent Collection." Inside, the walls showcased artwork from every student she'd mentored and every emerging artist

she'd championed.

"This space," I continued, "will always belong to Chicago's newest voices. Every season will bring fresh talent, guided by the woman who taught me that true luxury is creating beauty that changes lives."

Autumn turned to me, tears streaming down her face. "Tyson..."

"You've spent your life fighting for others to be seen." I wiped away her tears. "It's time someone fought for you."

She threw her arms around my neck as applause erupted. Against my chest, she whispered, "I love you."

"I love you more." I held her tight, not caring about cameras flashing or the crowd watching. "And I'll never stop."

A deep voice cut in. "Those pieces moved me to tears." Corey Rome, Chicago's top art critic, joined our circle. "The raw emotion, the technical skill. Where did you find him?"

"Working at his uncle's auto shop," Autumn said. "He welded during lunch breaks."

"Not anymore." I nodded toward Marcus, who chatted with three collectors. "He just received a grant to open his own studio."

The room buzzed with similar stories. Denise Jordan's grandmother had called every relative in Chicago - they filled an entire corner, taking photos and crying happy tears. Three of Autumn's former students, now teaching art in South Side schools, brought their current students to see what was possible.

“Five thousand for the third piece in Denise’s series,” called out a collector in Italian wool.

“Seven,” countered a woman in vintage Chanel.

“Ten,” said a quiet voice. The crowd parted to reveal a teenager in jeans and a hoodie. “I’ve been saving since I heard about the gallery opening.”

“You must be Anthony,” I said, recognizing him from the community center. “The one who paints murals at dawn before school.”

He nodded, hands shoved in his pockets. “That piece... it speaks to me. About fighting for your art even when nobody believes in you.”

I caught Autumn’s eye across the room. She gave a slight nod.

“The piece is yours,” I told Anthony. “Keep your savings for art supplies.”

“But... those collectors...”

“Will find other pieces to buy. This one belongs to someone who truly understands it.”

Denise overheard and rushed over, hugging Anthony. “You better send me photos of where you hang it!”

Near the dessert table, I overheard two critics discussing the impact.

“When’s the last time you saw Aboriginal art next to South Side graffiti?”

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“When’s the last time you saw Black artists under thirty commanding these prices?”

“It’s about access,” his colleague argued. These kids now have studios, mentors, connections...”

“They have a future,” the first critic finished.

I shifted my attention back to Autumn, who danced between groups, introducing artists to collectors, explaining techniques to critics, and hugging proud parents. In her element, radiant with joy, she embodied everything this project stood for.

Near midnight, as the last guests departed, I found Autumn in her gallery, studying a piece from one of her first mentees.

“He used to paint in the museum basement because he couldn’t afford studio space.”

“Now he teaches at the Art Institute.” I stood behind her, pulling her back against my chest. “Thanks to you.”

“Thanks to us.” She leaned into me. “This whole project... it’s everything I ever dreamed of.”

“Not everything.” I turned her to face me. “There’s still Christmas morning.”

“What’s happening Christmas morning?”

“That would be telling.” I kissed her softly. “But I promise it’ll be worth the wait.”

“No hints?”

“None.” I lifted her hand, kissing each finger. “We should head to Rose’s. She’s expecting us for late dinner.”

“It’s almost midnight!”

“Since when has that stopped her from feeding people?”

Autumn laughed. “True. Let me grab my coat.”

As she walked away, I touched the small box in my pocket that I’d carry until tomorrow’s dinner. Rose had helped me plan every detail, from the timing to the perfect moment.

“Ready?” Autumn called.

I joined her at the door, taking in the space one last time - the art, the dreams, the love poured into brushstrokes. But mostly, I took in her, standing there in her burgundy gown, more beautiful than any masterpiece.

Chapter 15

Autumn

Christmas Day

The aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg wafted through Pearl’s on Christmas morning, mixing with the scent of Rose’s sweet potato pie. Red and green stockings hung along the exposed brick wall behind the counter, each embroidered with a family member’s name. A massive fir tree commanded one corner, its branches heavy with

ornaments collected over decades – many handmade by the kids in Rose’s extended family.

Everyone was here – my family and Tyson’s.

Michael’s twins raced between tables, their new Christmas sweaters already dusted with cookie crumbs. Madison skidded to a stop in front of me, brandishing a candy cane. “Aunt Autumn! Did you see what Santa brought me?”

“Show me, princess.” I scooped her up as she dug through her tiny purse, producing an art set with professional-colored pencils.

“Uncle Ty said these are just like yours!” Her eyes shone. “Will you teach me to draw like you?”

“Of course I will.” I kissed her forehead, catching Tyson’s eyes across the room, where he helped Rose arrange platters of ham and turkey. He winked, and my heart did that familiar flip it had been doing since our first kiss in this very building.

“There’s my girl!” My stepmother Diana, swept in, pulling me into a hug that smelled like her signature perfume and fresh-baked rolls. “You look radiant.” She held me at arm’s length, studying my face. “Love suits you.”

It was no secret that Rose had told everyone in the family that Tyson and I were dating. Everyone kept adding their ‘finally’ into the mix whenever they heard it, and I knew they couldn’t wait to bring it up today.

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“Mama...” But I couldn’t hide my smile.

“Don’t ‘Mama’ me.” She straightened my red cashmere sweater. “That boy finally got his act together, and I intend to enjoy every minute of it.”

My father appeared behind her, wrapping an arm around his wife’s waist. “Leave them be, woman. Though I have to say,” he lowered his voice, “it’s about time.”

“I can hear you both,” I said, but their teasing warmed me. Everything felt right – the festive decorations, the family gathering, Tyson’s steady presence as he moved through the space like he owned it. In many ways, he did. Pearl’s had been his home since childhood.

“Rose needs help with the mac and cheese!” Angela called from the kitchen.

“That’s my cue.” I headed back, pausing to squeeze Tyson’s hand as I passed. His fingers caught mine, pulling me in for a quick kiss that tasted like peppermint.

“Hurry back,” he murmured against my lips.

Warmth spread through me, and the kitchen buzzed with activity. Rose directed traffic while stirring gravy, a different royal blue dress protected by a crisp white apron. Tyson’s friend LaMont carved turkey as Angela assembled her famous seven-layer salad. Christmas music played through surround-sound speakers—Mariah Carey’s ‘All I Want For Christmas’—elevating the true spirit of family and loved ones in this season.

“There you are!” Rose pointed her wooden spoon at me. “Taste this gravy. Something’s missing.”

I sampled the rich brown liquid. “Needs more thyme.”

“That’s my girl.” She added the herb, then lowered her voice. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m perfect.” And I was. Last night’s gallery launch still felt like a dream – the permanent collection bearing my name, young artists getting their chance, Tyson’s pride as he watched it all unfold.

“Mmhmm.” Rose stirred the gravy with extra vigor. “And my grandson? How’s he treating you?”

“Like a queen.” I hip-bumped her. “You raised him right.”

“Course I did.” But she beamed. “Now take these rolls out. The natives are getting restless.”

I carried two baskets of steaming bread to the dining room, where the family had gathered around the long table. Tyson pulled out my chair – a gesture that earned whistles from his cousins and an “About time!” from Aunt Marie.

The feast began with Rose’s traditional blessing:

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for this food and the hands that prepared it. Thank You for family, old and new, and the love that brings us together this Christmas Day. Lord, we’re especially grateful for finally opening these children’s eyes.” She squeezed both Tyson’s and my hands. “Thank You for showing them what we’ve all seen for so long - that their hearts were meant to beat as one. Watch over their union,

guide their path, and keep their love as sweet as my potato pie. In Your Son's mighty name, Amen."

A chorus of "Amens" mixed with chuckles. Rose opened her eyes, dabbing at their corners with her napkin. "Now, let's eat before this food gets cold."

The blessing dissolved into the controlled chaos of passed dishes and overlapping conversations. Tyson's thigh pressed against mine under the table as he fought Michael for the last piece of honey-glazed ham.

"One time when these two used to race their bikes down Cottage Grove," James gestured between Tyson and Michael with his fork. "They crashed into Mrs. Johnson's rose bushes," Diana laughed. "She made them replant every single one."

"It was worth it, though," Michael grinned. "I won that race."

"You did not," Tyson pointed his knife. "I was ahead until you cut me off."

Angela piped up, "What I want to know is when are you two giving us another wedding to plan?"

"Let them breathe," my father's deep voice cut through the chatter. "Though I must say, watching you two dance around each other all these years nearly drove me crazy." My father winked at Tyson. "Good thing I always kept a bottle of bourbon handy."

"Like you needed an excuse for bourbon, Daddy," I teased.

"No, but it helped during those nights you two would sit on my porch planning your dreams, both of you too blind to see what was right in front of you." He raised his glass. "Now look at you – building those dreams together."

Tyson nodded at my father with respect. The kind of exchange that spoke through a look of understanding.

Silence fell as Tyson pushed back his chair and stood, pulling me up with him. “Actually, James, I have something to say.”

My heart stopped. Started. Raced.

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“You know what I remember most about this place?” Tyson smiled at Rose. “The day I brought Autumn here for the first time. I was covered in paint because this one,” he squeezed my hand, “knocked over an entire set of acrylics in art class. Grandma took one look at her and said we finally had someone else in the family who understood art.”

“And I meant it,” Rose added softly. “She fit right in.”

“That’s the thing about you, Autumn.” Tyson turned to face me fully. “You didn’t just become part of my family - you became my heart. Every Sunday dinner, every late-night conversation, every dream we built together brought us to this moment.”

He reached into his pocket and dropped to one knee. The room collectively gasped.

“Autumn Williams, you’ve been my best friend, inspiration, and heart. You taught me that true beauty is in how you fight for young artists, how you light up when describing a new piece, and how you’ve loved me even when I was too scared to love you back.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks as he opened a black velvet box. Inside, a ring that caught the Christmas lights was nestled—rose gold with a black diamond surrounded by smaller white stones.

“I don’t want to spend another day pretending you’re just my friend or business partner. I want forever with you. Will you marry me?”

I fell into his arms, and he caught me with ease. Nuzzling my face in the crook of his

neck, emotions dripped from my eyes, and I was overcome with unimaginable love.

“Is that a, yes?” he whispered, drawing a few chuckles from our family.

I nodded frantically. “Yes!” The word came out on a sob. “Yes, yes, yes.”

He slipped the ring onto my finger, pulling me into a heated kiss and setting my soul on fire. The room erupted in cheers and applause. Rose sobbed into her apron while Diana hugged James, both of them beaming.

“Finally!” LaMont shouted over the chaos. “Now I can stop watching him pine over you.”

Laughter cruised around, but the only thing I could focus on was the man who gripped me in an embrace so tight that I never wanted to be let go.

“I have one more thing,” he whispered, producing another box, this one huge and square.

“I can’t take anymore,” I cried.

“I’ll take it!” Aunt Marie shouted. “Whatever it is!”

Tyson chuckled and opened the box. The sparkle that gleamed across my eyes nearly blinded me.

“Tyson!”

The necklace was diamond studded and was so exquisite I knew it came off the museum floor.

“I love you,” he said.

And I fell back into his arms and wept.

Six Months Later

The Autumn Williams Gallery buzzed with energy as another class of young artists prepared for their first showing. Denise Jordan, now our lead instructor, helped a teenage girl adjust her painting while Anthony – our youngest teacher – demonstrated brush techniques to a group of wide-eyed kids.

The program had exploded since Christmas. What started as a small community initiative had spread across Chicago. Three more teaching spaces had opened in different neighborhoods. The Benefield hotels now featured rotating exhibits from our students, many of whom had gone on to sell their work to serious collectors.

“Ready for the next batch?” Tyson’s voice carried across the gallery. He’d just finished installing track lighting for our newest exhibition space.

I crossed to him, admiring how his t-shirt stretched across his shoulders. Just looking at him made my pulse race. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Good.” He pulled me close, kissing me soundly. “Because I have plans for this place. Big plans.”

“Tell me.”

“First, we expand the scholarship program. Then, we open a residency for international artists. After that...” He gestured expansively. “The world.”

I laughed against his chest. “Dream big, Mr. Benefield.”

“I learned from the best, Mrs. Benefield-to-be.”

“I love you.”

“I love you more.” He lifted my chin, our mouths crushing in a mouthwatering kiss.